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Full Length Research Paper

The Perceived Impact of a Post-Secondary Education Program on Kenyan Catholic Sisters' Understanding of Their Lives as Women Religious

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Kenyan women religious, also referred to as Catholic sisters, serve in ministries that provide essential aid in their communities. These ministries include vital positions in the fields of education, healthcare, social work, finance, and agriculture, among others. However, approximately 80% of women religious in sub-Saharan Africa lack the post-secondary education necessary to adequately meet the evolving demands of their ministries (Wakahiu & Shaver, 2015). For this reason, women religious in Kenya have been provided an opportunity to participate in a uniquely delivered, fully funded, post-secondary education program. This qualitative study endeavored to answer the questions: Has participation in the program transformed Kenyan sisters' understanding of their lives as women religious? And, has participation in the program influenced how Kenyan women religious view themselves in their ministries? In-person interviews with program participants and staff (N = 17), as well as document reviews, were conducted to effectively answer these questions. Upon analysis, three themes were revealed, including enhancement of ministry abilities, empowerment, and relational engagement. From these themes, the concept of servant leadership emerged as the ultimate perceived impact of the post-secondary education program on Kenyan Catholic sisters' understanding of their lives as women religious and view of themselves in ministry.

Keywords: women religious, ministry, leadership, post-secondary education

Many Catholic women religious in Africa begin their journey of consecrated life with minimal formal post-secondary education or professional preparation. In fact, 80% of women religious in African congregations possess no post-secondary education credentials (Wakahiu & Shaver, 2015). Due to a deficiency in her education, a sister may lack the advanced levels of leadership and specific professional knowledge necessary to carry out her ministry (Wakahiu, 2015). Unfortunately, in many cases, this level of insufficient training remains incomplete due to a shortage of congregational resources in sub-Saharan African countries (Nakitende, 2015).

According to the Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC), women religious in Africa have a positive impact on the welfare and wellbeing of those to whom they minister, as well as those in their congregational communities (McNally, 2016). Through their various ministries in fields including education, social services, and health care, they work to ease suffering, alleviate poverty and provide assistance to marginalized groups (Wakahiu & Keller, 2011). Much of this work is done without any formal post-secondary education credentials or training (Wakahiu, 2015).

Little research has been completed on the impact of increased formal education for sisters, yet there is evidence that leadership

training increases sisters' competency within their ministries. In a phenomenological study by Wakahiu and Keller (2011), it was discovered that completion of a leadership training program increased African women religious' capacity to deliver effective services in their communities. The leadership training program achieved this outcome by increasing the sisters' technical skills, as well as their ability to plan and incorporate theory into practice (Wakahiu & Keller, 2011). This research identifies the immense potential of African women religious, should they receive the proper training and education necessary to carry out their ministries.

The Post-Secondary Education Program

To address the problem of insufficient professional preparation, Kenyan women religious have been provided an opportunity to participate in a uniquely delivered, fully funded, post-secondary education program, subsequently referred to as the post-secondary education program or the program. Facilitated by a collaborative of United States congregations of women religious and their respective colleges/universities, the post-secondary education program aims to increase the capacity of African women religious by providing them the opportunity to achieve diploma, bachelor's, and master's level education (Wakahiu & Shaver, 2015). The program is donor funded

through a grant and provides educational opportunities for sisters in ten countries in sub-Saharan Africa: Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Lesotho, South Sudan, Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania, Cameroon and Nigeria. As of October 2017, the program had served 541 African sisters since its inception in 2012. Although there are a few other programs that provide African sisters the opportunity to further their education, none of these match the large scale interventions of the one being studied (Sivasubramaniam, 2021).

In order to provide education that is context-specific and culturally relevant, the program partners with 22 colleges/universities in both the United States and sub-Saharan Africa. Through these partner institutions, program participants are able to complete their studies online or in person at the diploma, bachelor's, or master's degree levels. Sisters are permitted to enroll in any program of study offered at the partner institution, depending on their individual needs. Sisters selected to participate in the program have obtained permission from their congregation to further their studies and either maintain or leave their current ministry while enrolled. Balancing religious life, academic work, and sometimes ministry can be quite challenging for sister participants. Yet overall, through the program's annual evaluations, participants generally report having a positive experience.

Once accepted to both the program and the college/university, the sister is provided a full tuition scholarship, a laptop, and reimbursement of all textbook expenses. Aiming to be a transformational learning experience, the program provides additional support to its participants through workshops such as Orientation, Reflective Learning, and Alumnae. These workshops offer program participants the opportunity to engage with other program participants and progress in their studies with purpose. Since the majority of sisters in the program have been out of school for quite some time, these additional supports are necessary to integrate the sisters into the college/university environment. Forty-nine percent of program participants are between the ages of 33-42, making them non-traditional students within the college/university setting. The program's workshops offer sisters the skills necessary to be successful in their studies, with topics covered including time management, study skills, and technology training.

This study focused primarily on program participants completing their education in Kenya. The program has been operating within Kenya for seven years, which is the longest duration of all the program's countries of operation. Members of the post-secondary education program's pilot cohort of students, which began in 2012, were Kenyan residents. As such, the program is fully developed in Kenya, which has contributed the greatest number of participants: 119 sisters as of 2017. Kenya also has the highest number of program graduates, with 81 Kenyan sisters having completed the program in its entirety by 2017. Program partner institutions in Kenya include the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), Tangaza University College (TUC) and, ChemChemi Ya Uzima Institute. Due to the high number of program participants in Kenya, participants from

this country have also developed a complex support network amongst themselves, consisting of an elected student leadership board, fundraising endeavors, common religious activities, and a "buddy system."

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceived impact of the post-secondary education program on Kenyan Catholic sisters' understanding of their lives as women religious. This study also examined what impact, if any, the post-secondary education program has had on Kenyan sisters' view of themselves in their ministries.

Literature Review

The impact of Catholic sisters in Africa has habitually been overlooked by mainstream society, as these women often go about their important work quietly, with little fame or notoriety (Ngure, 2015). Yet women religious are important figures in their communities, and provide valuable services that are desperately needed (Ngure, 2015). During the course of this literature review, it was discovered that limited literature exists in the area of Catholic sisters in Africa and further study is needed.

The Construct of Religious Life

According to the Catholic Church's Code of Canon Law, women who wish to devote themselves solely to God are referred to as women religious or "sisters" (Can. 573-606). These women aspire to be an example of Jesus Christ and view their commitment as "A gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit" (Paul, 1996). Sisters profess vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience in order to join with the church in this special way (Can. 573). The Code of Canon Law speaks of "special gifts" that women religious possess; these gifts promote good works for people through charity, and are based on the will of the Father (Can. 574-577). Sisters endeavor to live out the love they believe Christ showed humanity, or evangelize (i.e., share belief and understanding of that love), through gifts of sacrifice and service.

In Pope John Paul II's *Vita Consecrata*, the mission of sisters is further interpreted by the statement that sisters have "a call to pursue competence in personal work and to develop a dynamic fidelity to their mission, adapting forms, if need be, to new situations and different needs" (1996, p. 63). In addition, *Vita Consecrata* dictates that "Providing room for women to participate in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves" is necessary in consecrated life (Paul, 1996, p.98). Melia (1999) conducted a qualitative, grounded theory study in which she found the themes of central meaning in the lives of women religious to include, in order of frequency: faith, family, education, friends, community of sisters, service to others, and prayer. These findings suggest that receiving and providing education are both integral aspects of religious life.

In order to provide bishops with a synthesis of the major components of religious life, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes (CRSI; 1983), with the approval of Pope John Paul II, published *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate*. This document serves as an overview of Canon Law as it specifically pertains to women religious and offers a construct for religious life (Sheehan, 1989). In this document, religious life is characterized by nine components: consecration by public vows, communion in community, evangelical mission, prayer, asceticism, public witness, relation to the church, formation, and government. From these components, women religious are informed that consecration is the basis of religious life, that God is first in all things, and that their commitment belongs to the life and holiness of the Church (CRSI, 1983).

Congregations of women religious are governed under a hierarchical system (Martin, 2009). Regional, provincial, and general superiors lead congregations of women religious and make the majority of significant decisions (Wakahiu, 2015). These leaders form the countrywide national associations of women religious, such as the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK), which promote solidarity across congregations (Ngure, 2015). In addition, congregations in Kenya can be under Pontifical Right, meaning they follow direct leadership of the Apostolic Holy See in Rome, or Diocesan Right, meaning they follow the authority of the bishop in their particular diocese (Ngundo, 2015). A congregation of Diocesan Right has often been founded by the diocesan bishop, which traditionally allows him authority in these types of institutes (Cafardi & Hite, 2017). However, in both types of religious congregations, local bishops and superiors often share power and responsibilities, each having their own authority as well as overlapping duties (Cafardi & Hite, 2017).

Educational Disparity in Kenya

Kenyan women, in general, have been found to have less access to quality education at all levels than their male counterparts (Heath & Jayachandran, 2018; Kisaka, 2015; Machio, et al., 2017; Milligan, 2014; Odhiambo, 2016). Twenty-five percent of women in Kenya have been found to have a child and/or marry before their 18th birthday (Machio et al., 2017). In addition, Kenyan girls have been found to engage in sexual behavior due to a lack of resources (Oruko et al., 2015). In a qualitative study of two Kenyan public secondary schools, it was reported that young female students were having sex for money and other necessary items, such as sanitary towels (Milligan, 2014; Oruko et al., 2015). Kenyan girls themselves also cite sexual relationships with boyfriends and menstrual care problems as reasons that lead them to drop out of school (Oruko et al., 2015).

For some young Kenyan women, dropping out of school is culturally acceptable (Mwaiko, 2017). For example, the Kenyan Samburu and Maasai communities enforce female genital mutilation and early forced marriage, which limits a girl's ability to achieve higher education (Mwaiko, 2017). Kisaka (2015)

found that Kenyan women are commonly socialized to be passive members of society. They are thought to focus more on their motherly duties than their academic performance in school (Kisaka, 2015).

A culture of poverty and bias against females has also contributed to their lower rate of access to education in Kenya (Mwaiko, 2017). Kenyan teachers have been found to use derogatory language in reference to females, lowering their self-confidence in the classroom (Milligan, 2014). In addition, schools often lack female washrooms, which promote an undesirable connotation to girls' attendance (Heath & Jayachandran, 2018). This is compounded by a negative parental attitude towards female education completion (Kisaka, 2015). An inequitable school environment greatly influences girls' ability to complete their education (Oruko et al., 2015).

Educational Development of African Women Religious

African women religious have expressed some difficulty with understanding the policies regarding educational development within their own congregations (Nakitende, 2015). Often, congregations will require a certain level of education prior to entering their religious order (Phiri et al., 2015). In sub-Saharan Africa, women are generally required to hold a high school certificate prior to entry (Phiri et al., 2015). This policy assists in ensuring that sisters are able to fully understand their religious education or formation and will perform appropriately in their assigned ministry (Phiri et al., 2015). However, research shows that many sisters require additional capacity building and higher education in order to reach their full potential (Nakitende, 2015; Ngundo & Wiggins, 2017; Wakahiu, 2013). The problem with this requirement is that many congregations do not have the necessary financial and human resources to provide such education and lack clear policies on which sisters are to receive educational advancement (Nakitende, 2015; Ngundo & Wiggins, 2017).

For instance, in a study of the Little Sisters of Saint Francis, a congregation with sisters located in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, it was discovered that the educational advancement of sisters depended to a great extent on chance and the availability of scholarships (Nakitende, 2015). This particular congregation had a formal policy on record regarding educational advancement, but the sisters reported inconsistencies in the ways they were selected for educational opportunities (Nakitende, 2015). Although the majority of sisters enter religious life in sub-Saharan Africa having only completed secondary education, some enter at higher levels, creating great variation within and among communities (Phiri et al., 2015). Without a formal procedure for congregational leadership to select sisters for educational advancement, many are left in the dark regarding when they will receive an opportunity to return to school (Phiri et al., 2015).

In 2006, the first special assembly for Africa was held by the Synod of Bishops titled "The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace." At that time, Pope Benedict

XVI (2006, Sec. 60) advised that appropriate preparation was of the utmost importance for consecrated persons in Africa. It was also stated that education regarding peace and justice was necessary to prepare African consecrated persons for the socio-political realities of their ministries (Benedict, 2006). This document encourages consecrated persons to acquire an interest in and knowledge of the social and political state of Africa to better serve their communities (Benedict, 2006).

In addition, Vatican II clearly states that during the Scholasticate portion of a woman religious' formation, or training to become a sister, there is to be a focus on ensuring the sisters' educational needs are met (Paul, 1965). Yet in Africa there has been minimal attention paid to this mandate (Phiri et al., 2015). Phiri et al. (2015) outlined several reasons for education's importance in an African woman religious' life, including having relevancy in post-modernity, creating sustainable congregations through social and political reform, being able to confront ecclesial problems, improving economic conditions, and being of better service to their people. Phiri et al. (2015) even proposed that every African Catholic sister should be afforded the opportunity to study theology at the diploma or degree level.

Servant Leadership and Religious Life

Obi and Bollen (2017) argued that in Nigerian congregations, respect, fairness, and equality are top priorities amongst congregational leadership. These researchers outlined that superiors of women religious recognize that they have been elected to their position by their fellow sisters, and consider this with every decision they make (Obi & Bollen, 2017). This consideration extends to superiors' allocation of education and training resources within a congregation (Obi & Bollen, 2017). According to Obi and Bollen (2017), these Nigerian sisters' actions exemplify the concept of servant leadership.

Servant leadership, a philosophy coined by Greenleaf in the 1970s, proposes that servant leaders are those who value social responsibility and support the growth and well-being of others above all else (Dierendonck, 2010; Greenleaf, 1970). Greenleaf asserted that servant leaders are servants first, but have made the conscious decision to lead as a means to better serve individuals and communities (Greenleaf, 1970). Coetzer et al. (2017, p. 1) define servant leadership as a "desire to serve, followed by an intent to lead and develop others...to ultimately achieve a higher purpose objective" to the benefit of others.

The concept of servant leadership stems from the Bible and has been applied to the actions of women religious in several studies (Coetzer et al., 2017). The leader-follower relationship is built on trust, as the servant leader offers her followers a visionary concept or goal to help them reach their full potential (Greenleaf, 1970). Further, Greenleaf (1970) believed that servant leadership:

Requires that the concerned individual accept the problems he or she sees in the world as his or her own personal task, as a means of achieving his or her own integrity. He or she sees the external manifestation of this internal achievement as beginning with

caring for individual persons, in ways that require dedication and skill (p. 37).

Of particular relevance to the lives of women religious is the fact that many researchers refer to Jesus Christ and his teachings to his disciples as a true model of servant leadership (Parris & Peachey, 2013).

Greenleaf (1970) felt that formal education can contribute to the expertise of a servant leader but an individual cannot be taught how to be a servant leader, as servant leadership develops through a natural, personal, process of experience. In a qualitative narrative research study (N = 4), Cooper et al. (2018) found five childhood characteristics that greatly influence the exhibition of servant leadership behaviors later in life; these included family life (i.e., a secure attachment to parental figures), church involvement (i.e., Christian teachings, belief in God), a mentor/role model relationship (i.e., coaches, teachers, others in the community), accountability (i.e., being given responsibilities), and group activities (i.e., belonging to a club or team). In particular, Cooper et al. (2018) recognized the importance of positive early childhood role models in the exposure to servant leadership behaviors, which was found to have lasting impact in the long-term development of a servant leader.

The literature reveals there is some variation regarding characteristics demonstrated by a servant leader; this may be due to Greenleaf's assertion that servant leaders are not defined by what they do but rather who they are and their commitment to the service of others (Dierendonck, 2010; Parris & Peachey, 2013). Nevertheless, Dierendonck (2010) proposes there are six characteristics a servant leader typically possesses, including an ability to empower others, be humble, be authentic, demonstrate interpersonal acceptance, provide direction, and display stewardship. In addition, achievement of educational proficiency has been linked to four servant leadership competencies, including empowerment, stewardship, building relationships, and compelling vision (Coetzer et al., 2017).

In African cross-cultural contexts, including studies conducted in Rwanda, Kenya, and Ghana, the servant leadership philosophy has been found to be positively correlated with leader effectiveness (Brubaker, 2013). Brubaker (2013) hypothesizes this may be due to parallelisms between servant leadership and African cultural beliefs. For instance, Winston and Ryan (2008) suggest that the concept of servant leadership stems from global value systems, such as the African concepts of Ubuntu and harambee, rather than Western constructs alone. Winston and Ryan (2008, p. 217) draw a link between servant leadership and Ubuntu, or the traditional African collectivist belief that "to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form." More specific to Kenya, Winston and Ryan (2008, p. 217) also refer to the Swahili notion of harambee, which similarly embodies servant leadership ideals as it encourages "mutual assistance, joint effort, mutual responsibility, and community self-reliance."

Education's Impact on Understanding Religious Life

According to the secularization thesis, as a person or society progresses in education, their level of religiosity declines (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). Research shows that for Christians, and in particular Catholics, this thesis does not hold true (Pew Research Center, 2017). The Pew Research Center (2017) has found that Catholics, regardless of their level of education, remain at the same level of religious identification. Catholics at all levels of education are almost equally likely to pray daily, attend worship services weekly, and say they believe in God with absolute certainty (Pew Research Center, 2017). In reality, the Catholics with the highest levels of education are the most likely to say they attend Mass weekly (Pew Research Center, 2017).

For women religious in Africa, there is some belief that educational advancement results in sisters leaving consecrated life (Nakitende, 2015; Ngundo, 2015). Sisters report that in Kenya it is difficult to differentiate between the true vocation of women religious and those who falsely join religious life for the sole purpose of obtaining education (Ngundo, 2015). Ngundo (2015) posits that these sisters lack an understanding of religious life and an unwillingness to commit to the demands of the lifestyle. When interviewing Kenyan sisters, Nakitende (2015) found that religious superiors were quite disappointed in the departure of sisters from religious life after completion of educational programs. The superiors also reported that the withdrawal of sisters, in whom the congregation has invested resources, greatly damages the congregation financially (Nakitende, 2015).

Although there is some controversy regarding sisters who leave the congregation after graduation, the need for educational advancement within congregations is identified throughout the literature (Ngundo & Wiggins, 2017; Wakahiu & Kangethe, 2014; Wakahiu & Shaver, 2015). In a survey of African congregations of women religious (N = 18), 12% of congregations had more than 300 members with no higher education credentials, and 24% had more than 200 members with no higher education credentials (Wakahiu & Kangethe, 2014).

In the few studies that have been conducted on women religious obtaining post-secondary education, results have shown that the experience is challenging but greatly beneficial (Dimba, 2015; Wakahiu, 2013; Wakahiu & Kangethe, 2014; Wakahiu & Shaver, 2015; Wakahiu & Keller, 2011). One quantitative study, including women religious enrolled at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (N = 40), found that 72.5% of sisters reported that the large workload limited their time for spiritual matters (Dimba, 2015). In addition, 82.5% of these sisters reported that time spent reading books took away from their pastoral work, and 62.5% stated that absence from their religious community was a challenge (Dimba, 2015). However, this study did not ask sisters how or if post-secondary education has impacted their consecrated lives or understanding of their lives as women religious (Dimba, 2015).

Wakahiu and Shaver (2015) studied the post-secondary education program, analyzing specifically those participants (N = 17) who completed their coursework online, in order to identify benefits and challenges of this aspect of the program. This research identified interconnectivity, scarcity of university seats, and gender disparity as challenges but identified online learning as a viable and needed form of study in Africa (Wakahiu & Shaver, 2015). In addition, a qualitative study conducted by Wakahiu and Kangethe (2014) of 18 participants of the same program in Kenya and Uganda revealed that the program introduced sisters to technology and assisted them in defying African gender norms for leadership. No studies were found to assess the program's impact on the participants' perceived understanding of their lives as women religious or their view of themselves in their ministries.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative study methodological approach to explore the perceived impact of a post-secondary education program on Kenyan Catholic sisters' understanding of their lives as women religious. This methodology was used to answer the study's central research questions: Has participation in a post-secondary education program transformed Kenyan sisters' understanding of their lives as women religious? And has participation in a post-secondary education program influenced how Kenyan women religious view themselves in their ministries?

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Study participants were recruited and selected purposively based on their agreement to be interviewed. In total, 13 women religious were recruited during this process. In addition to the post-secondary education program participants, the researcher also conducted interviews with the facilitating organization's staff. These staff members included the two in-country staff currently stationed in Kenya, and two United States headquarters staff, the assistant and executive directors of the post-secondary education program.

Procedure

Once recruited, the program's in-country staff notified the program participants of their scheduled interview time, date, and location via email. During the scheduling process, in accordance with qualitative methodology, a review of existing public documents regarding the program was conducted. These documents included written evaluation reports, the program's web content, news articles (e.g., success stories), and program enrollment data, all of which were available on the program's public website. Document reviews were delimited to the facilitating organization's public documents that pertained to the post-secondary education program. Necessary background and contextual information regarding the education program were collected during document reviews via hand written memos containing the researcher's relevant thoughts and ideas, which were referred to throughout analysis.

To prepare the participants for the interview they were provided a copy of the interview protocol in advance. Although all study participants identified English as their primary language, they were provided with the interview questions prior to in-person meetings in order to minimize any possible language differences and put the participants more at ease. Providing the interview questions in advance allowed participants time to collect their thoughts and engage more easily in conversation with the researcher.

The researcher then conducted audio-recorded in-person interviews with the participants. Program participants provided their age, years of completed post-secondary education, concentration of study, number of years in religious life, and years since final profession, if applicable. The researcher then asked the participant each question on the program participant interview protocol, lasting approximately 30-60 minutes. In-person interviews with the program's in-country and administrative staff were then conducted, following the staff interview protocol. The purpose of program staff interviews was to provide the context of the program and to garner a full description of program functioning. All audio-recordings were then transcribed and uploaded into NVivo software for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an inductive constant comparative method, typical of qualitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Following Merriam and Tisdell's (2016, p. 204) analysis protocol, first "open coding" was conducted which was expansive and purely descriptive. Then these "open codes" were interpreted and grouped according to similarity (i.e., analytical coding), effectively placing them into categories or themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As directed by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the lists of codes and categories from each transcript were then merged to create one master list. This process continued throughout the rest of the interviews and the documents under review. Codes and category names were reflected upon by the researcher constantly throughout this process in ongoing memos.

Once it was apparent that saturation had been reached, final categories were determined appropriate if they met the category criteria set by Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 213), meaning they were exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitive to the data, and conceptually congruent. Finally, the researcher reviewed the categories and considered their relationships and possible connections in terms of the study's research questions. This last step in data analysis contributed to the study's final result model.

Results

Description of Participants

Post-Secondary Education Program Participants

The sample of program participants interviewed for this study included 13 Kenyan post-secondary education program participants. Nine sisters attended the Catholic University of

Eastern Africa (CUEA), two attended Chemchemi Ya Uzima Institute, and two attended Tangaza University College (TUC). This sample was a fair representation of the population, as indicated in document reviews the largest number of sisters in the post-secondary education program attend CUEA in comparison to the other two schools.

The average age of all 13 program participants was 40 years. However, program study participants ranged in age from their late twenties to early fifties. These sisters also reported an average of 16 years in religious life, with a range from 1 to 27 years. In addition, the sisters reported an average of seven years since they made their final profession, with two sisters not yet making their final profession and one sister reporting 22 years since final profession. All program participants used English as their primary spoken language.

When asked about their current educational status, three sisters stated they were currently working towards earning their master's degrees. Of these three master's degree students, two of the sisters also earned their bachelor's degree through the post-secondary education program. The master's level sisters reported working towards degrees in theology, project planning, and business administration. The remaining ten sisters reported being enrolled in the program at the bachelor's level. Of these ten sisters, two had already graduated from the program with their bachelor's degree and eight remained enrolled, with five of these currently enrolled sisters being in their first year of the program. The sisters studying at the bachelor's level advised they were working towards degrees in education, social ministry, and development studies, amongst others.

Staff Member Participants

The four facilitating organization staff member participants consisted of two in-country staff members (i.e., the Kenyan country director and coordinator), and two United States headquarters staff (i.e., the program's assistant and executive directors). These staff members were all employed by the facilitating organization. The staff members reported working for the facilitating organization an average of three years, with a range from ten months to eight years.

Findings

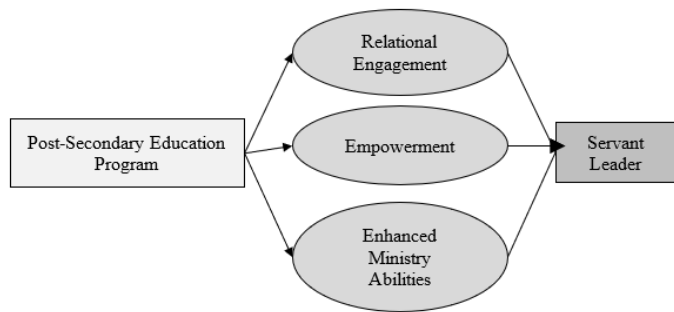
Through data analysis, it was determined that the post-secondary education program did indeed have an impact on sisters' understanding of their lives as women religious and their view of themselves in ministry. The program was found to meet the participants' needs and assist them in living out the religious life they had originally hoped to live.

Three themes emerged from the data regarding the program's impact on sisters' understanding of their lives as women religious and view of themselves in ministry; these included enhancing the sisters' ministry abilities, an increased sense of empowerment, and an improved ability to engage relationally. From these themes, it was apparent that the post-secondary education program developed sisters' ability to be servant

leaders and ultimately live the religious life they anticipated. Themes related to the program's impact on the participants' understanding of their lives as women religious and view of themselves in ministry are detailed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Post-Secondary Education Program's Impact on Sisters; Understanding of Life as Women Religious and View Themselves in Ministry



Enhanced Ministry Abilities

Study participants' responses that referred to explicit skills learned during enrollment in the post-secondary education program, supported by document reviews of program materials, were identified under the enhanced ministry abilities theme. Data coded in the following categories were included in this theme: professional, academic, congregation strengthening, and spiritual skills. Under this theme, study participants stated that the program allowed them to view themselves as more effective in their ministry, as they obtained the skills necessary to conduct their work in a more professional manner. As such, they recognized that with the proper post-secondary education, women religious are capable of being highly qualified in their fields, allowing them to better exemplify their ideal of life as women religious.

Empowerment

A theme of empowerment, including codes associated with increased self-confidence, was also identified as an outcome of participation in the post-secondary education program. Study participants commonly stated that as a result of participation in the post-secondary education program, they felt empowered in their ministries and lives as women religious. Further, with increased empowerment reported higher authority and autonomy in their ministries. For instance, Participant A said:

I can say that this has been the most important empowerment for me because to say the truth, before I was not a courageous woman. I had a lot of fears but now I am able to face any difficulties and any circumstance that I meet on my way.

Sister participants described that the post-secondary education program has prepared them for any circumstance, and as a result they feel more confident in their abilities. As Participant J stated,

“My disposition right now, I am quite prepared for whatever field of service.” They also explained that in order to empower and serve others, they themselves needed the empowerment they received through the post-secondary education program. Participant L said, “Working in community programs I found I needed some empowerment, some capacity to meet the needs of the people I was working with.”

Relational Engagement

Another common theme amongst study participants was that of relational engagement. Study participants often expressed that the post-secondary education program provided opportunities to engage with many different people from various backgrounds and cultures. Participants indicated that, prior to the program, they had never had these types of experiences. The participants said that it was through these interactions that they developed an awareness of the significance of relational engagement in life as a woman religious. The following codes were identified within this theme: social interaction, self-awareness, and leadership.

Servant Leadership

As a result of participating in the post-secondary education program, sisters were able to develop their ministerial abilities, become empowered, and more successfully engage in relationships, making them more effective in their lives as women religious and thus servant leaders. With these skills, the sisters indicated that they felt an increased sense of stewardship towards those served through their ministry and a sense of responsibility to better serve their communities.

Many sister participants expressed that their objective for completing the post-secondary education program was to ultimately provide a higher level of service to those to whom they minister, which is a fundamental characteristic of a servant leader. For instance, Participant H said, “The knowledge that I get is not something that I own. What I receive is something to be shared in my community.” The concept of service and stewardship was a common theme for sisters throughout the interviews. The sisters stated that the program offered them an opportunity to develop their professional skills in their various ministries, which would allow them to better serve others. Sisters then related the concept of serving others, through ministry, to their understanding of life as women religious. Through their participation in the program, sisters began to identify with the characteristics of a servant leader, which is related to their original model for life as a religious.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study participants stated that enrollment in the post-secondary education program allowed them to live up to their original ideal of religious life by increasing their capacity as servant leaders. Through the application of the study's theoretical framework, including transformative learning theory, womanism, and complex adaptive systems theory, the sisters' realization of themselves as servant leaders emerged as the outcome of the program. In conclusion, the program was found

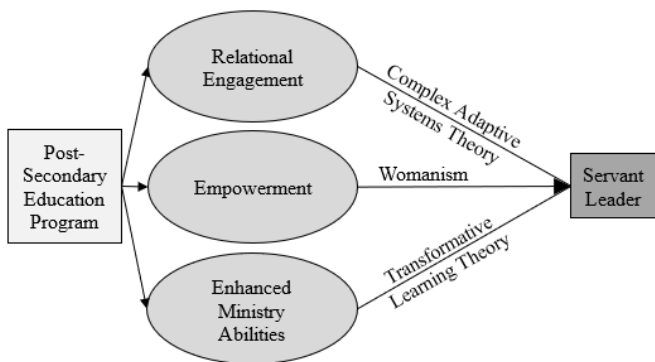
to nurture a sister's understanding that her role as a woman religious in ministry is that of a servant leader.

Emergence of Findings from the Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study significantly contributed to the interpretations of the findings. In utilizing complex adaptive systems theory, womanism, and transformative learning theory to understand the three themes discovered as the program's impact, the concluding concept of development as a servant leader emerged. Servant leadership was not originally reflected upon as a possible outcome of participation in the program and was not referenced in any completed document reviews; rather, the concept arose during the process of interpreting the findings in relationship to the theoretical framework. Figure 2 depicts these relationships, which are described further in this section.

Figure 2

Emergence of Findings from the Theoretical Framework



Application of Complex Adaptive Systems Theory

Complex adaptive systems theory allowed for the interpretation that the findings of this study are interconnected with the context, culture, and systems to which each participant belonged (Puzycki et al., 2014). This theory also helps to explain how all three theories of the theoretical framework are able to operate both independently and in concurrence. Each theory provides its own insight and contribution, but complete understanding cannot be achieved without consideration of all three perceptions.

Complex adaptive systems self-organize into patterns and demonstrate chaotic, fat-tailed, adaptive, and emergent behaviors (Holland, 2014). Non-linear self-organization describes the interaction of the theoretical framework because there is continuous and autonomous collaboration between each theory, and from this interaction servant leadership has emerged. The co-evolutionary relationship of the three theories did not operate in isolation from the context in which the participants found themselves, but had permeable boundaries allowing for dramatic transformation (Eidelson, 1997; Kauffman, 1995).

There are additional connections between life as a woman religious and servant leadership which can be more fully understood by complex adaptive systems theory. For example, study participants outlined the dynamic relationship between religious life and service. At the center of religious life remains God, and the sisters explained that, as part of serving Him, they must also demonstrate their love to other people and successfully engage in relationships with them. This is similar to the description of a complex adaptive system with many interconnected diverse parts, arranged in a hierarchical manner (Eidelson, 1997). Therefore, complex adaptive systems theory assists in understanding the role of a woman religious within her dynamic context and how the complex system to which she belongs contributes to her realization as a servant leader.

Application of African Womanism

The African feminist theory of womanism indicates that empowerment in an African context is related to an increased sense of conciliation, collaboration, complementarity, and consensus within cross-gender relationships (Coulibaly, 2015). This postulates that in African culture, a sense of empowerment does not come from the individual but rather from an ability to effectively connect and engage with others. The association between empowerment and relational engagement is echoed in the findings of this study. Study participants explained how the program increased their ability to communicate and understand others, and through this increase in capacity, they felt a sense of empowerment.

The achievement of the characteristics of womanism leads to the emergence of a servant leader because for a womanist, empowerment is not about "power" but mutual respect. Womanism is distinctive in that it incorporates African concepts of Ubuntu or harambee, emphasizing the respect of "humanity in its infinite variety of content and form" (Ogunyemi, 1985; Winston & Ryan, 2008, p. 217). These concepts accurately describe servant leadership, thus identifying the link between empowerment, womanism, and the emergence of a servant leader.

Application of Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory provided insight into how the sisters' understandings and views were transformed during participation in the program, linking the sisters' enhanced ministerial abilities to their development as servant leaders. Transformative learning occurs through the interaction of both instrumental learning (task-oriented problem solving, increasing proficiency in performance) and communicative learning (assessing beliefs through justification; Mezirow, 1996; Moyer & Sinclair, 2016). The post-secondary education program facilitated instrumental learning by providing academic and workshop content relevant to the sisters' ministries. Communicative learning was enabled through the sisters' frequent interactions with diverse groups, which the sisters identified as an increase in their ability to relationally engage.

Taken together, these domains indicate that the post-secondary education program was a transformative learning experience.

With a transformative lens, one sees that the sister participants have experienced a perspective transformation regarding their understanding of their lives as women religious, leading them to become more effective servant leaders. Sisters explained that the experience of assimilating information and engaging in critical reflection and rational discourse was transformative (Mezirow, 1997). In terms of transformative learning theory, they developed their frame of reference or worldview to be more “inclusive, differentiating, permeable, critically reflective, and integrative of experience” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 163). Each of these transformative characteristics aligns with indicators of a servant leader, once more signifying the emergence of this outcome.

Convergence of the Theoretical Framework in the Emergence of the Findings

Complex adaptive systems theory, womanism, and transformative learning theory must each be integrated to hold a complete understanding of the emergence of servant leadership as the final outcome of this study. The complex relationship between theories and themes assists in explaining by what means the sisters have emerged as servant leaders. In addition, each theory individually contributes to the understanding that the study’s outcomes are tied to servant leadership concepts. This model provides a foundation upon which to interpret the study’s findings and elucidate the perceptions of the study participants.

Interpretation of the Findings

Impact Parallels with Servant Leader Development

The post-secondary education program offered sisters the opportunity to further their knowledge and skills, but this was only a gateway to their emergence as servant leaders. Education is essential in building the trust of those whom the sisters serve, because a follower’s trust stems from their confidence that a leader is competent and knowledgeable in their field (Coetzer et al., 2017; Greenleaf, 1970). Generating and managing a follower’s trust is imperative to servant leadership, with all other servant leadership characteristics building upon this cornerstone (Greenleaf, 1970). Study participants undoubtedly quantified enhanced ministerial abilities (i.e., academic and professional knowledge) as an impact of the program and this will allow them to more successfully gain the trust of those they serve. However, as Greenleaf (1970) advised, although enhanced ministerial abilities are important to provide expertise, these competences alone do not create a servant leader.

The sisters also stated that the program empowered them to effectively serve in their ministries by making them more courageous and confident in their professional abilities. Self-empowerment is necessary to possess a compelling vision or goal and to eventually empower others, both of which are characteristics of a servant leader (Dierendonck, 2010). In describing how they were empowered, the sisters articulated

their compelling visions and goals for their futures as women religious, signifying possession of these servant leader characteristics. Furthermore, a truly empowered person is able to demonstrate the servant leadership characteristics of humility and authenticity (Dierendonck, 2010). The interviewed sisters continually displayed humility and authenticity in their descriptions of their experiences in the post-secondary education program and their service in ministry. This was particularly evident in the way the sisters attributed their successes to the grace of God, the facilitating organization, and their congregations.

Participating in the program also alleviated the sisters’ fears that they would lose their ministerial positions to others with higher educational qualifications. A servant leader is able to exhibit certainty and purpose of mission to those whom they serve, which, prior to the program, sisters often felt unable to do (Greenleaf, 1970). The sisters expressed that they experienced anxiety over holding lesser educational qualifications than their lay coworkers. This imbalance created great uncertainty for the sisters and in some instances prohibited them from expressing their professional opinions assertively.

Impact on Understanding of Life as a Woman Religious

The post-secondary education program allows its participants to effectively and confidently live their lives as women religious. Study participants recognized that the skills, knowledge, and confidence they received from the program should be utilized for the more professional, comprehensive, and competent service of others. By adeptly performing as servant leaders, the sisters were more closely able to exemplify the life they originally intended to live as women religious. Accordingly, the post-secondary education program assists in maturing the sisters’ servant leadership qualities, which allows them to cultivate an enhanced understanding of their roles as women religious.

The Role of Women Religious. By developing sisters as servant leaders, the post-secondary education program has concurrently allowed them to possess a fuller appreciation of their roles within the Catholic Church, their congregations, and society as a whole. Women religious are a part of a complex adaptive system, characterized by nonlinear local relationships and influenced by God, the Church, and their cultural context (Bircher & Hahn, 2016; Eidelson, 1997; Fidan & Balci, 2017). The complexity associated with the dynamic interactions of these agents can create some ambiguity for sisters in regard to their roles within the system (Eze et al., 2016). However, a servant leader values service above all else and achieves his or her own integrity through the service of others (Greenleaf, 1970). Therefore, a sister who is also a servant leader feels complete and that she is representing herself adequately in her religious life when she is proficiently serving others in need. By developing as a servant leader, a sister is more skillful in determining her role, regardless of the context or situation in which she finds herself. Being one component in a larger, complex adaptive system, this quality is of great significance and increases sisters’ poise for recurrent transformation of roles.

Women's Rights and the Servant Leader. Eze et al. (2013b) have proposed that African women religious do not have a place in the formally educated, male-dominated hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The results of this study, in concurrence with the complex adaptive nature of the structure and functions of the Catholic Church, contest this claim. The post-secondary education program has increased sisters' sense of self-worth and empowered them as servant leaders, who have a personal sense of responsibility to improve the conditions around them. Without necessarily intending to, servant leaders "acquire extraordinary and compelling powers that attract followers" (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 35). The same is true of sisters' ministries; their goal is to serve the marginalized, but they have proven to be remarkably influential in their communities (Ngure, 2015). This emergence provides evidence that the sisters will make long-term significant contributions to human development through their ministries, signifying they do indeed have a vital place within the structure and function of the Church.

In general, African women have faced inequalities and are largely absent from positions of power (Chea, 2008; Maloiy et al., 2016; Rombo et al., 2017). In particular, Eze et al. (2013b) propose that sisters experience *de facto* gender-based discrimination in the Catholic Church. Through development as servant leaders, sisters are more capable of engaging in activities that characterize the African theory of womanism, which opposes gender-based discrimination. A servant leader is fair and respects others, even those who are different than herself, such as a member of the opposite sex (Greenleaf, 1970). Therefore, the sisters as servant leaders also display characteristics of womanists, who value conciliation, cooperation, consensus, and complementarity (Greenleaf, 1970; Ogunyemi, 1996). This development gives sisters the insight, when necessary, to advocate appropriately for their self-worth and recognize when they may be improperly treated in the Church and their community.

The theme of empowerment, described by the study participants as an impact of the post-secondary education program, can also be understood as a result of a transformative learning experience. Lavrysh (2015, p. 65) states that a main indicator of transformative learning experiences is a shift from an external locus of control to an internal one in which adults are aware of their personal capabilities. Bulut (2018) classifies this actualization of a person's potential or ability as self-actualization. This idea is similar to the finding that the sisters experienced an increased sense of capacity, which advanced into a sense of empowerment

Relationships within Congregations. Prior literature revealed there is abundant ambiguity associated with educational advancement within African congregations of women religious (Nakitende, 2015; Phiri et al., 2015). Differences in educational attainment had previously been found to create harmful conflicts regarding obedience and submission within a congregation (Eze et al., 2016). In contrast, the participants of this study expressed humility, gratefulness, and understanding related to the

educational opportunity allotted to them. With participation in the post-secondary education program came obedience to self-responsibility and the communal nature of the congregation. Instead of instilling a desire for increased power and control, participation in the program made sisters aspire to support the growth of others, especially other sisters within their congregations.

As discovered by Obi and Bollen (2017), in the African context, when congregational leadership exemplifies servant leadership, qualities of respect, fairness, and equality amongst relationships become top priorities. This is aligned with the African ideal of the communal nature of congregations and the Swahili notion of *harambee* encouraging mutual, community growth (Winston & Ryan, 2008). Given the importance of relationships amongst sisters, especially since feelings of loneliness and desire for intimacy have been found to be the most common reason for leaving a congregation, development of servant leaders may be the key to congregational vitality in the African setting (Smith & Knowles, 1991). This provides evidence that the post-secondary education program and the development of the sisters as servant leaders may be fundamental to the positive enhancement of African congregational health.

Impact on View of Self in Ministry. All of the study participants spoke of feeling inadequate in their ministry, due to a deficiency in their post-secondary education, prior to joining the program. They desired to carry out their ministry, and thus their lives as women religious, in the manner they originally envisioned, but felt unable to accomplish this because of a lack of skill and knowledge. The post-secondary education program allowed sisters to see themselves as more capable of appropriately responding to the needs of those they serve, which increased the sisters' efficacy in ministry. This outcome was also found, via document reviews, to be a designated long-term goal of the program. Improved proficiency for the sisters meant they were better able to engage with marginalized groups, identify their needs, and then attend to them appropriately, whatever the context.

Key Program Component. The key component of the post-secondary education program, in regard to its impact on the sisters' understanding of life as women religious and their view of themselves in ministry, is that it provides the opportunity to experience and develop diverse relationships. Although this program component was not explicitly addressed in program documents, it emerged clearly from participant interviews. This unique feature of the program brings sisters and lay people together throughout the course of the program, greatly influencing the participants' stated outcomes. This, too, is aligned with Greenleaf's (1970) belief that formal education alone does not create a servant leader; rather, servant leaders develop through natural processes of experience.

The importance of the relational component of the program is aligned with the literature regarding the significance of relationships in transformative learning, especially for women (English & Irving, 2012). Being able to engage in dialogue with

diverse groups and the development of authentic relationships are core components of transformative learning (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Sharing life narratives with others is crucial to transformative learning; this relationship is also consistent with the findings of this study. Specifically, transformative learning was facilitated as cohort members reflected together on their experiences in the program at annual Reflective Learning Workshops. Lavrysh (2015, p.65) said of transformative learning theory, "Through conscious reflection, learning can become transformative and be translated into personal empowerment and self-awareness." Moreover, Ntseane (2011) suggested that the value of collective empowerment should be integrated into educational opportunities in order for transformative learning to occur in African contexts. Findings of this study support this claim, as study participants outlined their own personal sense of empowerment in terms of their relationships and ability to serve others.

The study participants also discussed how participation in the post-secondary education program has had positive, unforeseen, long-term effects, such as strengthening their congregations and leading the sisters to build sustainable organizations in the service of others. This is characteristic of the complex adaptive systems concept of the butterfly effect, as a small change to an initial condition has greatly impacted the larger system (Holland, 2014). Given this insight, it is conceivable that the full extent of the program's long-term impacts have yet to be seen, and additional developments continue to be possible.

Limitations of Study

This study focused specifically on determining the impact of a post-secondary education program on Kenyan sisters' understanding of their lives as women religious and views of themselves in ministry. As such, only women religious and program staff who had contact with the post-secondary education program in Kenya were interviewed. Findings from this study are therefore not generalizable to populations outside of these parameters, decreasing the external validity of this study. Interviewing of sister participants from other countries in which the post-secondary education program is operational may generate variation in the findings.

This study also utilized in-person interviews of program staff and participants, a data collection technique which relies heavily on self-report. The self-report of study participants can be subjective and may change over time. Although measures were taken to increase the validity and reliability of this study, findings may also be limited to this particular case.

Recommendations for Future Studies

First, it is recommended that a future study be conducted on a wider range of sisters who have participated in the post-secondary education program. This study focused exclusively on program participants currently residing in Kenya; future studies should expand this participant pool and consider participants from the other nine countries which the program serves. This would allow for cultural comparison and would

determine if the results discovered in this study are able to be replicated in the program's other countries of operation. Secondly, other post-secondary education programs for women religious should be investigated to more precisely explore and compare the unique characteristics of the program under study in this research. Thirdly, the findings of this study could be further investigated by conducting a large scale quantitative study with the same or similar participant pool. Lastly, it is recommended that future studies focus more exclusively on the relationship between post-secondary education and servant leadership in the lives of women religious. This relationship should be explored in greater depth with additional interview questions pertinent to this topic. Further exploration of servant leadership in various cultural contexts would enhance understanding of the cross-cultural differences in this area.

Implications for Study

The findings of this study indicate that for women religious, participation in a post-secondary education program can contribute to the development of a servant leader. Study participants stated that the program allowed them to fulfill the role of a woman religious with integrity, serving those in need with precise skill and care. The program allowed them to live up to the model set by the sisters who had inspired them to join religious life in their youth. Through enhanced ministerial abilities, empowerment, and relational engagement, the post-secondary education program has enabled its participants to act as servant leaders, allowing them to make positive change in their communities.

These findings suggest that an investment in a woman religious' post-secondary education is beneficial not only to the sister but also to those she serves. The post-secondary education program was found to deepen a sister's understanding of her life as a woman religious and build great confidence in how she carries out her ministry. In doing so, the sister is more adept in understanding herself, others, and her environment, allowing her to make a greater impact. Through this process, women religious develop into influential servant leaders, better capable of carrying out their mission to spread God's love through service. Potentially, the findings of this study could be extended to African women in general, promoting women's empowerment throughout the continent and encouraging the achievement of worldwide gender equality.

Conclusions

Evidence of this study suggests that the post-secondary education program had a positive impact on the lives of Kenyan women religious. Specifically, the post-secondary education program enhanced the sisters' ability to minister, empowered them, and improved their capacity to effectively engage in relationships with others. Through these accomplishments, the post-secondary education program participants developed as servant leaders, which has enabled them to better serve in their communities. By exemplifying characteristics of servant leaders,

program participants are more adept to fulfil their potential and create lasting positive change.

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