News



Srs. Anne Munley, left, and Jane Wakahiu have served as executive director of the African Sisters Education Collaborative, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. (GSR graphic/Chris Herlinger; courtesy of LCWR)



by Chris Herlinger

View Author Profile
cherlinger@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

October 14, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

In expanding educational opportunities for African sisters so that they can better play a catalytic role in the communities they serve, African Sisters Education Collaborative has been guided by gifted women's leadership.

In addition to the current executive director, Sr. Draru Mary Cecilia, ASEC has been led by three other directors. Sr. Jane Wakahiu, a member of the Institute of the Little Sisters of Saint Francis, Kenya, served 2011-2017, and is now associate vice president for program operations and head of Catholic Sisters for the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, a major funder of Global Sisters Report.

Sr. Anne Munley, a member of Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, served 2006-2007 and is now associate director for the Emerging Future Initiative of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. She will be one of two honorees at a Dec. 7 gala event; the other will be Sister of St. Joseph Carol Jean Vale, who was president of Chestnut Hill College in 1999 and was one of the "founding mothers" of ASEC.

Benedictine Sr. Jacquelyn Ernster, who died in 2021, served as executive director 2007-2011.

GSR recently asked Wakahiu and Munley for their perspectives on ASEC's 25 years.

***GSR*: As you look over the 25 years, what is the biggest accomplishment of ASEC, the biggest change it has undergone, and what is a continued challenge?**

Wakahiu: ASEC's educational programs — Sisters Leadership Development Initiative, Higher Education for Sisters in Africa, two-year college program, and high schools — have been an extraordinary asset that has facilitated unlocking sisters' potential and provided them with pathways to recognize and sharpen their talents to deliver their services in efficient and effective ways.

In addition, ASEC has facilitated the shifting of sisters' ability to network and collaborate with other actors in the African region, thus continuing to build and strengthen global sisterhood. Learning from the partnership with higher education institutions where sisters are studying, sisters consult with each other to identify solutions to challenges in their ministries.

The collaboration of the four higher education institutions and congregations that founded ASEC demonstrates the vision and spirit of synodality, walking together in communion to support women religious in Africa.

Looking back, I can attest to the transformation in religious life in Africa. Well-educated sisters facilitate improved service provision, the impacts of their ministries are experienced in transforming the communities they serve, and their voices on behalf of those they serve are respected in the ecosystem. Sisters are assuming leadership at universities and as contributors to dialogues on issues that impact the communities. In the agricultural sector, for example, sisters are applying improved methods of farming to increase production while protecting the Earth, our common home.

Read this next: ASEC uplifts 'entire communities' in Africa in 25 years of educating sisters

Munley: As I look over the 25 years of ASEC, I think that the biggest accomplishment is the realization that life-changing collaboration is possible when it is steeped in mission, mutuality, imagination, interdependence and sisterhood. ASEC is a wonderful example of persistence in bringing a dream to birth, synergy of goals and values, trust in God's providence and courageous commitment to the development of God-given gifts and capacity for leadership.

The biggest change I see is that the charismatic inspiration that fueled the early decades of ASEC is now institutionalized in organizational structures that can work toward long-standing sustainability of its mission.

As you look over your own tenure, what are you proudest of?

***Wakahiu*:** When I served as ASEC's executive director, we expanded the Sisters Leadership Development [Initiative] to 10 African countries. The ASEC board tasked me with developing an online university program for sisters, given the high costs of studying in the USA.

I had just completed studies in higher education administration, a skill set that helped to design the Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA) program. It was delivered in two models: the first allowed sisters to complete 27 credits online in the USA and the remaining credits at a partner university in their own country.

Through partnership with African universities, this model was piloted at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (Kenya) and the Catholic University of Ghana (Sunyani). The second model was entirely onsite at local African universities. I am proud to have developed partnerships with 24 colleges and universities in 10 countries in Africa. The success of this program continues to benefit many sisters.

I also designed a research initiative with the goal of giving sisters a pen to write their own stories and experiences in Africa. As a result, I led in publication of two books: *Voices of Courage: Historical, Socio-cultural, and Educational Journeys of Women Religious in East and Central Africa* and *Transformative Partnerships: The Role of Agencies, Church and Religious Institutes in Promoting Strategic, Social and Sustainable Change in Africa*. This project encouraged sisters to share their own experiences and stories about their life and ministries.

I am also delighted to have played a significant role in envisioning and creating the visiting scholars program in partnership with the Center for Applied Research in Apostolate. Fr. Tom Gaunt of CARA and I were at a Catholic Sisters Initiative convening, [and] we discussed ways we could partner; the result was the program. The sisters who have benefited from this program are implementing applied research projects and practices in Africa.

Read this next: Over 25 years, ASEC programs to educate sisters have evolved

The final program I am proud of is the two-year college program, which gives sisters opportunities to enter and complete two-year college programs — as teachers, nurses, social workers, etc. Sisters transfer the skills they acquire to transform the communities they serve by creating pathways for others.

I deeply appreciate the friendships and partnerships that developed during my time at ASEC; they continue to this day, and the work of this incredible organization inspires me.

Munley: I feel blessed that I had the opportunity to help shape its beginnings, do the on-the-ground work of establishing relationships with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the various African countries and make initial contacts with potential collaborating colleges and universities in Africa.

I also worked with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation in securing ASEC's first substantial grant for the Sisters Leadership Development Initiative; collaborated in preparing ASEC bylaws; getting ASEC incorporated in the state of Pennsylvania and

attaining 501 (c)3 tax exemption status. The best part was the relationship building and personal contact. ASEC transformed my life.

Advertisement

As ASEC concludes its 25th anniversary, what other reflections do you have?

Wakahiu: The Hilton Foundation continues to support several programs because we believe skills development is key to unlocking individuals' potential and abilities. I have witnessed the impact sisters have through service provision and creating transformative programs that support underserved communities. I applaud the ASEC board and staff for their fidelity and service to sisters. ASEC is making profound impacts in Africa for Catholic sisters today and in the future.

Munley: It is important to say that great things can happen when good people work together to move from dreams to deeds to foster "abundance of life" for all. This initiative was truly fueled by deep belief in the power of education to liberate giftedness for the common good. The sisters in Africa have nourished my sense of mission in profound ways.