



Religious Life for Women in East / Central  
Africa: A sustainable future  
June 2016 – October 2019  
Dr. Catherine Sexton

# The Research Team



Margaret Beaufort Institute  
of Theology  
Celebrating 25 years



Durham  
University

Centre for Catholic Studies

CONRAD N.



FOUNDATION

## Research team (L to R)

Sr Dr Deusdedita Lutego CST	Tanzania
Dr Catherine Sexton	United Kingdom
Sr Scholastica Mwale SCO	Malawi
Dr Maria Calderón Muñoz	Ecuador/UK
Sr Christine Keneema DM	Uganda
Sr Margaret Akoth Sewe IBVM	Kenya
Sr Helen Kasaka LSMI	Zambia



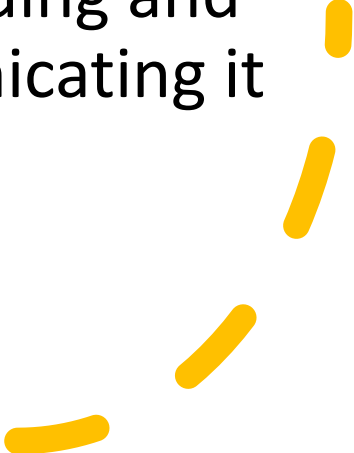
A collaborative research project between **Durham University's Centre for Catholic Studies** and the **Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology**, generously funded by the **Conrad N.Hilton Foundation's Catholic Sisters' Initiative**

# Aim of the Project

To further enrich local theological discussion about the apostolic or active form of religious life for women in the region and contribute to the growing global discourse on the same



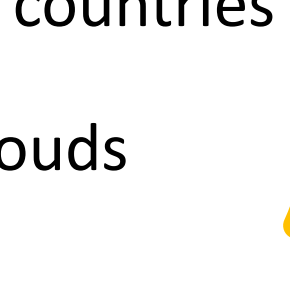
# Research questions

- What are sisters saying is the essence of Religious Life for women in Africa today and into the future?
  - What are the key challenges to the development & living of this essence?
  - What are the best ways of ensuring the understanding and living of it, and communicating it to sisters in formation?
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# Stage 1 Survey

- Survey with one open-ended 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 5 phrases or sentences as examples of what you mean*

- 3,000 statements from 621 sisters from 79 congregations in 5 countries
  - Sisters originated from 23 countries but 90% were African
  - Short reports and word clouds were prepared & sent to congregations
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# Stage 2 Focus Group Discussions

- Congregations were invited & 50 chose to participate in Stage 2
- Stage 2 involved focus group discussions reflecting on & deepening their responses to Stage 1 question
- 56 discussion groups held in 50 congregations in 5 countries





## Stage 3: theological commentators

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- **Sr. Chama Mwila OP (Zambia)**
- **Sr. Margaret Kubanze LSOSF (Uganda)**
- **Sr. Rael Otieno SMK (Kenya)**
- **Fr. Tim Redmond SPS (UK - Kenya)**
- **Sr Dr. Teresia Tarimo OSS (Tanzania)**
- **Sr. Dr. Redemista Ngonyani OSB (Tanzania)**
- **Fr. Joe McCullough SPS (Ireland/South Africa)**
- **Sr. Dr. Marren Rose Awiti IBVM (Kenya)**
- **Sr Mercy Shumbamhini CJ (Zimbabwe)**
- **Sr Revocate Kabahuma MSOLA (Uganda/Malawi)**
- **Sr Rita Namayanja IHMR (Uganda)**
- **Sr Joyce Meyer PBVM (USA – Zambia)**

## Theme 1

# Sustainability of congregations

- Sustainability of finances and numbers as 'new wineskins'
- Sustainability of spiritual and charismatic integrity as 'new wine'

# NEW WINE IN NEW WINESKINS



THE CONSECRATED LIFE AND ITS  
ONGOING CHALLENGES SINCE VATICAN II

Congregation for Institutes of  
Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life



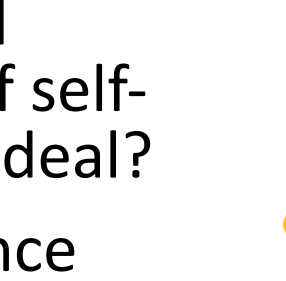
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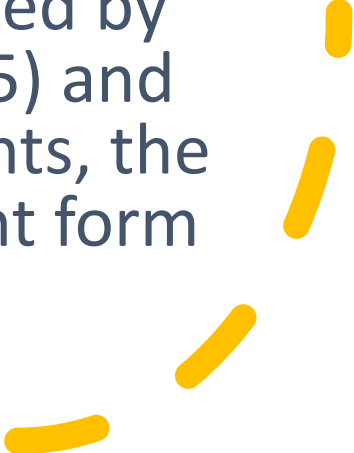
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# Sustainability as Spiritual and charismatic integrity

- We identified great potential for sustainability: incarnational & sacramental theology; centrality of God; following of Christ; availability and evangelisation
  - All participant congregations apostolic/active in character yet most live a semi-conventual way of life – ‘mixed life’
  - Theme of community life most prominent in the research
  - Particular form of physical community constitutive of self-understanding: reality or ideal?
  - Model questioned only once
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# Living the 'mixed life'

- The 'mixed' life: an attempt to balance apostolates and shared prayer/community life – adapting to what was allowed – not charism led
  - Importance of context – this is the continent of Africa and not the global north. The history of religious life need not be this future
  - Despite reforms prompted by *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965) and other teaching documents, the 'mixed life' still dominant form
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# Challenges of the 'mixed life'

- Community life is accorded primacy, as the first, if not main apostolate and the main source of spiritual nourishment and mutuality.
  - Mutuality is rarely encountered in apostolates; spoken of as a one way service
  - Communion and mutuality more common in discussion about community than apostolates
  - Apostolates rarely referred to as the 'source' of the life
  - Trying to '**balance**' community life and apostolates leads to stress and exhaustion
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## Theme 2: The role of charism

### We found:

- a high level of questioning and self-critique
- confusion between apostolates, charism and spirituality
- sisters relying on a motto or strapline to explain the charism – reduces the complexity and story element of charism
- these issues...across both pontifical and diocesan right congregations

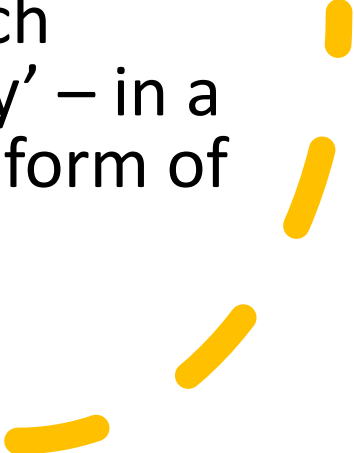
### Our question:

To what extent is community and other aspects formed in and evangelised by the charism?




# Charism and deeper examination of the life

## Data points to the need/desire for a deep examination of the life

1. Re-focus on a life of communal prayer in intentionally semi-monastic form
  2. Adopt a stronger ministerial focus, where the life is informed by ministerial needs
  3. We may be witnessing the interplay of the reading of the signs of the times and each congregation's 'deep story' – in a new context. An evolving form of religious life?
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# Theme 3: Sisters and the Church

- Conflicting accounts of sister-clergy and sister-lay relationships
  - Ecclesial nature and location of vocation affirmed
  - Misunderstanding and misperception of RL and conflict with clergy
  - Can we realistically expect a voiced experience of communion?
  - **Our question:** Can sisters say and claim 'we are Church'?
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# Concluding questions

The research leads us to ask

- whether what we have heard constitutes a call for further, deep renewal
- OR whether we are witnessing the emergence of a form of apostolic religious life which is appropriate to the cultural and socio-economic contexts in which it is being lived?
- OR indeed, are these factors shaping and influencing each other so that the renewal becomes context-specific?





### UISG Website

<http://www.internationalunionsuperiorsgeneral.org/religious-life-east-central-africa/>

### Website of the Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs/constructivetheology/rlvp/>

Report  
available

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