Celebrating the Unique Gifts and Talents of Each Individual Person
Reverence As Our North Star

By Sr. Draru Mary Cecilia, LSMIG, Ph.D., ASEC Executive Director

Welcome to the Rays of Hope edition 2021. In this edition the theme of Reverence is explicated from diverse perspectives by the different authors of articles. A core value of the African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC) is reverence, which highlights that:

ASEC respects the special value, unique talents and gifts of each person created and sustained by God. To reverence life, is to act and respond with deep respect and compassion for the dignity and diversity inherent in humanity. ASEC extends services across multiple cultures and communities, to the global north and south, operating with an appreciation for the uniqueness of people and their worldviews; and with empathy by listening, reflecting and promoting communication that is meaningful, honest and inclusive.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the call “we are at this together” sounded almost contrary to the call for social distancing, masking up and sanitizing. Social distancing drove us to create, curve and protect a space that we called our own. At the same time, we became more conscious and respectful of the social space of each other for health and safety reasons.

On a recent flight, as we boarded and took our assigned seats in the aircraft, the steward constantly reminded us to “be kind to one another.” This reminder appeared to suggest to me that shared space slipped from our memory so quickly! We needed a reminder to re-enter and share public space again after several months of social distancing. Literally, during the flight the steward encouraged us to learn again to reach out in kindness across our social boundaries and, in deep reverence, welcome other travelers to share our social space. Therefore, reverence is suggested as the North Star that guides us to re-learn how to share our private and public spaces again.

In the challenging years of 2020/21, I am delighted to inform you that the value of reverence enabled us to stretch our imagination and creativity to keep ASEC’s programs afloat and running online in spite of poor electricity and internet infrastructure in Africa. The Catholic sisters in Africa continue to be strengthened as the North Star that guides us to re-learn how to share our social space of each other into good health and safety.

In this edition of Rays of Hope, we’ll explore Reverence, one of ASEC’s six core values. ASEC respects the special value, unique talents and gifts of each person created and sustained by God. To reverence life, is to act and respond with deep respect and compassion for the dignity and diversity inherent in humanity. ASEC extends services across multiple cultures and communities, to the global north and south, operating with an appreciation for the uniqueness of people and their worldviews; and with empathy by listening, reflecting and promoting communication that is meaningful, honest and inclusive.

ASEC Programs

Our fight against extreme poverty happens in the most vulnerable communities across Africa. Sisters serve in areas that are geographically difficult to reach, lack adequate infrastructure and suffer from harsh climates, war, natural disasters, disease and violence. Catholic sisters courageously seek out the overlooked and advocate for the underserved. They are called to go to the hard places. We are called to give them the tools to make a bigger impact.

Programs of African Sisters Education Collaborative, or ASEC (AYE-sek), are always evolving; molding to fit the specific needs of sisters serving in the rural and poor communities of sub-Saharan Africa.

Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI)*

SLDI (ES-elle-dee-eye) provides sisters with technology, administration and finance training through three one-month workshops over three years. Through SLDI, sisters gain the practical skills and confidence to build strong networks and take up leadership roles in their congregations and communities. Since 2007.

Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA)*

HESA (HESS-uh) provides opportunities for sisters to access higher education (diploma, undergraduate and master’s degrees). HESA is delivered through partnerships with higher education institutions in Africa and online in the U.S. Since 2013.

Service Learning

Students and sisters from ASEC founding institutions participate in annual service trips to Africa. Accompanied by mentors, U.S. participants travel to Africa for three weeks and are immersed in a wide range of volunteer opportunities, serving side-by-side with African sisters. Since 2008.

Research Initiative*

The Research Initiative aims to promote research on Catholic sisters in Africa, increase African women religious’ research skills, provide opportunities for sisters to engage in research projects and develop ASEC as a central repository of data related to women religious in Africa. Since 2010.

Institutional Capacity Building (ICB)*

Housed under SLDI, ICB (EYE-see-bee) supports the internal strength and the external service of national conferences/associations and congregations in Africa as they strive to positively impact human development. The goal of ICB is to strengthen systems and improve the vitality and vibrancy of African women religious. Since 2019.

*Made possible by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.
**Spotlight on Where We Work**

**CAMEROON**: The instability in war-torn Cameroon created serious financial problems for the Sisters of St. Therese, who provide rehabilitation services and therapy for children and adults with physical and neurological disabilities. But Sr. Leonarda Ngoin Tubuo, SST, was able to use what she learned in SLDI to start a sustainable farm that supplements the rehab center’s income so they can continue to provide services to those in need. Sr. Leonarda then shared her project details with current SLDI participants during a “virtual field trip” experience.

**NIGERIA**: Five HESA-sponsored sisters received Head of Department awards for their outstanding academic performance at the 2021 Veritas University, Nigeria, graduation ceremony.

**GHANA**: HESA-sponsored sister Sr. Gifty Anastasia Blewu, SMMC, graduated top of class at the Catholic University College of Ghana (CUCG). This marks the third consecutive year that a HESA-sponsored sister was the top graduating student at CUCG.

**ZAMBIA**: SLDI alumna Sr. Memory Zingwaya, RSHS, acquired funds to purchase 4 incubators for Monze Mission Hospital in Zambia. The hospital only had one incubator and when it stopped working, the maternity ward was unable to accommodate the number of premature babies needing care. Her efforts resulted in a total of 7 incubators purchased for the hospital.

**LESOTHO**: As Administrator of Mazenod Girls High School in Maseru, Sr. Augustina Thokoa, SNJM, is using what she’s learned in SLDI to improve conditions for both students and staff. Some of her accomplishments include: developing a new financial plan, increasing enrollment, installing a solar power system, upgrading the girls’ dormitories and acquiring 70 computers for the technology lab.

**SOUTHERN SUDAN**: SLDI Alumna & HESA Participant Sr. Mary Faida, SHS, noticed how difficult it was for her neighbors to obtain healthy food during the lockdown in South Sudan. So, she and other sisters taught the community how to plant vegetables using sacks and broken buckets on their verandas.

**UGANDA**: As Head Teacher, Sr. Betty Namatovu, IMHR, is using her HESA-sponsored education to improve conditions at St. Matia Primary School in rural Uganda. She’s renovated much of the property, installed fences and electricity, restored clean water and even planted vegetable crops for students and staff to access on school grounds.

**KENYA**: A sponsorship program for children’s education was initiated by SLDI alumna Sr. Lucy Kanjira, RGS. Her project addresses a number of needs within her community such as educating the youth, empowering parents, improving food accessibility, reducing malnutrition and providing life-altering empowerment for women and young girls.

**MALAWI**: SLDI alumna Sr. Amelia Nyendwa, TS, is using her new skills to coordinate COVID-19 food relief for local widows. The beneficiaries expressed their gratitude, as the maize meals will help to improve their nutrition and well-being. Widows in Africa already face challenges getting food and basic necessities and this has been exacerbated by the pandemic as prices continue to rise.
Called Back To Reverence

By Sr. Patricia M. Bombard, BVM, D.Min., ASEC Advisory Board Member

One day, years ago now, a very important insight came to me as I sat on a bus making its way down State Street in downtown Chicago, IL. I was seated next to a window and as I looked out on the street crowded with cars, taxis and buses all packed in between the rows of tall buildings that hid the sky, something prompted me to throw out a silent question: “How did our world get into the mess we are in?” I followed this with another: “What have we lost that we need so desperately to get back if we are going to provide a future for coming generations?”

I wasn’t really expecting to get an answer to my silent questions—not on the bus, anyway. I was just doing something I often do: pondering. So, for a quiet moment, I just sat there, leaving the questions hanging in the space between the window and the world. Then, quite unexpectedly and from deep within the stillness of my mind, came a surprising reply in a single word: reverence. In the moment, I realized I wasn’t sure what the word meant—or, more precisely, what was being called for within the sense of the word.

Shortly thereafter, as these things sometimes go for me, I was in the library using an encyclopedia to look up some information I needed. As I paged through the book, I stumbled on a photograph of Albert Schweitzer. It was a name I had heard, but I knew very little about him at the time except that he had been a doctor and founded a hospital in Africa. I started to read the caption beneath his photograph and was stunned to learn that in the early part of the twentieth century, Schweitzer formulated his own philosophy, which he called “Reverence for Life.” Seeing again that word reverence brought me right back to my own experience on the bus a few days earlier. I paused my research to read the full article on Schweitzer.

I learned that Schweitzer had formulated his philosophy after an experience he had on a small steamer moving slowly up a river in Africa. As he stood at the rail of the steamer, looking out over the river, the boat passed a herd of hippopotamuses lounging in the water. Drawn in by the beauty and tranquility of the scene, Schweitzer pondered a question that had puzzled him for years: “What is the most valid basis for ethics?” As he stood there, a reply to his question emerged. He later wrote:

“There flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase, ‘Reverence for Life.’”

After reading this description, I closed the book, marveling at the resonance of our reflective experiences. I thought, “Is this just Albert and me, or is there something more going on here?”

In the months that followed, as I moved into reading more articles and books on the relationship between spirituality and the ecological crisis, I discovered that many more people have come to the same conclusion about reclaiming reverence. Yet the question remains, how do we do this?

Becoming Reverent

Cultivating reverence is an inner journey of growth. It involves a growing awareness that who you are as a human being is a story of relationships. It involves recognizing and accepting that you are interdependent and, from within that realization, learning to develop within yourself an attitude of reverence.

Reverence, to my mind, includes a respect for the limitations and gifts that each living being, each plant, each rock—even each mosquito—has to offer through its own unique miracle of existence.

Reverence begins with the growing awareness that all life is interconnected. In other words, it demands a dramatic shift in worldview from individualism to community.

Cultivating reverence continues with an in-the-moment conviction that each and every creature has an inherent right to existence. That awareness leads me to pause to observe my own behaviors as I interact with other beings—whether it be an insect or another human. I can act now with an awareness that each one of us, no matter how humble or grand, is somehow held within the unity of the whole.

References for this publication are available at asec-sldi.org/rays21.

What’s the Difference between a Sister and a Nun?

Great question, see page 21 for the answer.

Frequently Asked Questions About Catholic Sisters

Are Catholic sisters highly educated?

Every congregation understands the importance of education in living out its charism. Catholic sisters in the U.S. are known to be highly educated. However, in Africa, about 70% of Catholic sisters do not have higher education credentials. Because of the great need for their services, sisters are often underqualified for the positions they hold (like teachers, nurses, bursars, etc.). This is why ASEC’s mission is so important.

Do sisters make money?

Catholic sisters dedicate their lives to service and take a vow of poverty. Many sisters in Africa serve in low or no paying jobs in very poor, rural areas. When a sister does earn a salary, the money goes directly to her religious community (which is financially separate from the Vatican). Sisters are given a small stipend by their congregation to pay for personal items.

Are sisters supported by the Catholic Church?

Sisters are regulated by Church law/Canon law, but orders of sisters are not financially supported by the Catholic church as an institution. In fact, most Catholic organizations are financially separate from the Vatican. The money that you put in the collection basket during mass does not go to sisters, unless it’s to pay the salary of a sister who serves in your parish.

ASEC’s Research Initiative

Catholic Sisters: Critical Investigators and Capable Researchers for Africa

By Tara Lopatowsky, Ph.D., CCS, ASEC Senior Program Manager, Monitoring & Evaluation

SEC’s Research Initiative aims to promote research on Catholic sisters in Africa. The initiative is designed to increase African women religious’ research skills, provide opportunities for them to engage in research projects and develop ASEC as a central repository of data related to women religious in Africa.

Through the Initiative, ASEC strives to increase the academic literature available on Catholic women religious in Africa and develop sisters as critical investigators. Equipped with investigatory skills, sisters will be capable of conducting rigorous research that will strengthen the capacity of their congregations and positively impact human development.

Academic Publication & Research-Related Webinars

In 2021, the ASEC Research Initiative saw tremendous growth in the areas of academic publication and research-related webinars. The Initiative focused its efforts on conducting research related to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact in ASEC’s 10 African countries of operation. This research has provided critical insight into how to best support ASEC’s beneficiaries and stakeholders through this unprecedented time.

In total, four ASEC-related research articles were published in academic journals, five are currently under peer review and two are in development.

Visiting Scholar Fellowship

ASEC continues to strengthen partnership with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, through the implementation of the Visiting Scholar Fellowship and the hosting of a virtual webinar on the integration of charism, spirituality, mission and ministry.

The 7th visiting scholar, Sr. Lucy Dora Akello, LSMG, was selected from Uganda and is currently studying remotely with researchers at CARA due to travel restrictions. ASEC is currently in the process of selecting an 8th visiting sister scholar from Ghana.

Raising Awareness

The Initiative has made strides in developing additional connections with institutions and research partners with similar objectives. By participating in events such as Marywood University’s Virtual Research Day, we are able to bring awareness to ASEC’s Research Initiative.

Central Repository of Data

Further, ASEC has advanced the integration of its organization-wide customized database, which will be greatly beneficial in future research projects and help pique interest in ASEC-related research opportunities going forward.

You can learn more about ASEC’s Research Initiative at asec-sldi.org/research.
Sisters in Action  How sisters are using their ASEC-sponsored education to serve their communities.

Sr. Eveline Ambe Bi, SSA (left), is passionate about empowering women to contribute to peace building in war-torn Cameroon.

In Nigeria, Sr. GraceAnn Igave, OP, is using her SLDI skills to educate the youth.

SLDI alumna Sr. Veronica Nkom, OLF, obtains mattresses and blankets for internally displaced families in Nigeria.

In East Cameroon, Sr. Yvette Sam, SUSIC, used her SLDI skills to secure funding for a borehole and pump to provide potable water, improve sanitation and reduce water-related diseases like cholera and typhoid in her local neighborhood and school.

Two HESA sponsored sisters representing Catholic University College of Ghana place 3rd in National Nursing Competition.

In Tanzania, sisters attending the SLDI Finance Workshop take field trips to local projects run by ASEC alumnae, such as this farm.

Sr. Caroline Munene, DSH, witnessed the devastating impact COVID-19 had on the local economy and how the loss of income left many in Kenya without food. Empowered by the SLDI program, she raised funds to purchase food and distributed it to families in need.

SLDI participant Sr. Judith Atukwatse, OLGC, was inspired to start a vegetable and poultry project in her Ugandan community.

Poetry Book launch of The Child is Black, Collection of Poetry Volume 1, written by SLDI alumna Sr. Esther Karos, OSF, of Uganda.

In Nigeria, Sr. Veronica Nkom, OLF, put on a Career Day for students in the school where she serves. She says, “The SLDI training has sharpened my initiative and where there are resources we try to put into practice what we have learned. And we learn to improvise, also.”

Statistics from educating Catholic sisters in 10 countries in sub-Saharan Africa show the incredible impact sisters are making on marginalized communities. Because of people like YOU, ASEC has served over 5,300 sisters & stakeholders with INCREDBLE results such as:

- **2.2 M+ Served**: ASEC alumnae have served over 2.2 million people in poor, rural communities across Africa—where help is needed most.

- **$19.5 M+ Raised**: ASEC alumnae have raised over $19.5 million in funding for community sustainability and improvement projects.

- **35,500+ Mentored**: ASEC alumnae have mentored more than 35,500 people, sharing the skills they’ve learned through ASEC with others.

- **3,800+ New Jobs**: Projects initiated by ASEC alumnae have created over 3,800 jobs in under-served rural African communities.

**The Power of Technology**

Empowering sisters to learn and use technology and providing sisters with access to computers are very important steps in achieving ASEC’s mission. Laptops enable sisters to practice their skills, study for degrees and enhance their ministry work.

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*References for this publication are available at asec-sldi.org/rays21.*
SLDI

2021 Year in Review

Over 3,310 unique sisters
has empowered
since the program’s inception in 2007, SLDI
period.
the program, which is taught over a three-year
sessions the opportunity to enhance their
leadership competencies and professional
levels, which allows for new and exciting connections
within a diverse network of sisters.

Alumnae Success
SLDI alumnae have shown incredible levels of success once given the gift of
education. Sisters are able to serve
people more effectively, while
sharing their knowledge and creating
jobs within their communities.

SLDI Alumnae Report:
• Serving 2.2+ million people*, mostly in rural areas.
• Mentoring nearly 30,000 individuals.
• Creating 4,000 jobs, aiding in economic growth within
their communities.

Field Trips
Field trips began in 2015 to provide a
hands-on learning experience for sisters in the SLDI program. What makes the
experience even more fruitful is that
many of the visited projects are led by
SLDI alumnae. Sisters are opened up
to the possibilities ahead of them and are able to ask questions to alumnae who have walked before them.

In 2021, due to COVID-19, field trips
morphed into online site visits, where SLDI participants meet with alumnae for a virtual field trip experience on Zoom. This allows current participants to interact with alumnae and learn about successful projects.

Alumnae Network
Upon completion of any ASEC program, sisters enter into the ASEC Alumnae Network. ASEC organizes annual workshops in each of it’s ten countries of operation, which provide sisters and their
members with professional development and networking opportunities.

For the first time, ASEC Alumnae
organized and produced the
SEC Alumnae Report, a
radio program that
features successful projects and effective practices of alumnae around the world. This report shares the impact of SLDI alumnae and ASEC program graduates across ten countries.

SLDI Alumna Uses Radio to Combat COVID-19 in Zambia
Sr. Astridah Banda, OP, is using the leadership skills she learned in ASEC’s SLDI program to share critical health information about the pandemic. After completing a COVID-19 training sponsored by Alight and Sisters Rising Worldwide, she felt empowered to share what she had learned to prevent the spread of the virus.

So, she organized and produced the
COVID-19 Awareness Programme, a
radio live show where she broadens public health messages and pandemic guidelines to an estimated 1.5 million people, including underserved communities across Zambia. She invited other sisters on the show to translate information into several of the estimated 72 dialects’ spoken in the country.

Bill Gates named Sr. Astridah one of seven "Unsung Heroes of the Pandemic."

Bill Gates recently featured Sr. Astridah in his popular Gater News newsletter and praised her work on FM 99.1 Yatsani Community Radio in Zambia.

Read more at asec-sldi.org/banda.

Sr. Astridah Banda, OP, live on the air.

Sr. Judith Atukwatse, OLGC, used the skills she learned in SLDI to start a vegetable and poultry project for her community in Uganda.
On the Other Side of Reverence

By Sr. Mary Persico, IHM, Ed.D., President, Marywood University; ASEC Board of Directors Founding Member

As one who has spent many years in ministries where words such as respect, reverence and compassion were held up as core values of the organization, I have routinely tried to practice by my life or put into words what it means to be a person who respects or reverences others, or who acts with empathy or sympathy with those who journey this path of life with me.

In October of 2019, a few months before the onset of COVID-19, I had the great fortune of traveling to Nairobi, Kenya. Having been invited to deliver the commencement address at the Catholic University of East Africa (CUEA), I set out with wonderment and a bit of trepidation about what I would find when I arrived at my destination.

One in Nairobi, I was delighted to meet many Kenyan sisters who were participants of ASEC’s SLDI program, a large group of sisters who were graduating with the class of 2019 and HESA graduates who had gone on to become leaders in healthcare, education and social services ministries.

In many ways, I felt like Anna when she saw the Messiah on the steps of the Temple in Jerusalem. Having heard about the blessings of ASEC for the twenty years of its existence, to see it in action at last evoked great gratitude in my heart and soul. It was an experience that far surpassed the expectations I had from the start.

In all, I spent only five days in Nairobi. During that time, I met many people and engaged in numerous activities. To this day I still wonder how we managed to accomplish as a result of the four-hour Commencement Ceremony, visits to convents, clinics, two universities, gatherings of sisters, a sidewalk market, a giraffe sanctuary and an elephant orphanage.

When my time in Nairobi had come to an end and while it was still fresh in my mind as I boarded the flight to Heathrow and then home, I realized that there was one overarching feeling that enveloped me. It was a sense that I had been treated with the utmost respect and empathy with those one communicates this in the course of re-telling the stories of being at all these events and experiences?

It’s fun and normal to talk about the giraffes and elephants. It’s exciting to recount the university events leading up to commencement. It’s awe-inspiring to exchange stories about what the sisters have accomplished as a result of their studies in ASEC programs. But who talks about reverence?

This invitation to address the ASEC’s core value of reverence gave me permission to express my gratitude to the people of Kenya for teaching me the very thing I have inadequately tried to portray by my life for many years.

Beyond any other sentiment, I was humbled — by the attentive presence of those who worked at the national conference and conventions/associations and conferences as they strive to positively impact human development.

In the ICB program, ASEC recognizes the existing capacity of institutions of women religious in Africa and collaborates in strengthening these systems to improve the vitality and vibrancy of institutions of women religious.

The pilot ICB program continued in Year 2.

• 7 workshops for superiors were held in 7 countries; 3 additional workshops are planned for SLDI Year 3.
• The national conference and congregation capacity-building process in Ghana concluded in March, 2021.
• 1 convening of 2 congregations in Ghana was held in 2021 to build capacity in grant/proposal writing.

Delivering the SLDI program during a global pandemic has been challenging to navigate. But, it has also given us the opportunity to reflect, re-imagine and collaborate globally in creative and innovative ways. We are excited to explore what else is possible in the coming year.

You can learn more about the SLDI program at asec-sldi.org/sldi.

ASEC’s Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA) program.

ASEC Virtual Partners Workshop

In preparation for Phase VI of the SLDI program, ASEC held a 3-day Virtual Partners Workshop from June 15-17, 2021. Important discussions took place, especially surrounding updates and changes to the SLDI program planned for Phase VI. Specifically, ASEC will continue to work closely with partners and consultants to develop the curriculum for these two additions.

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ASEC-SLDI.ORG/RAYS21

19% pursue degrees through ASEC’s Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA) program.

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2021 Year in Review

HESA

1,600+ Served
Since 2013, over 1,600 sisters (≈150 in 2020-21)* have participated in the HESA program.

600+ Graduates
Over 600 sisters (≈150 in 2020-21)* have graduated through HESA with degrees relevant to their ministries.

24 Partnerships
ASEC partners with 24 higher education institutions* in the U.S. and 10 African countries of operation.

100 Honors Students
Approximately 100 HESA students* reported graduating with honors in the 2020-21 academic year.

Higher Education for Sisters in Africa

By Rosemary A. Shaver, M.Ed., ASEC Senior Program Manager, HESA & Scholarships and Tara Lopatofsky, Ph.D., CCLS, ASEC Senior Program Manager, Monitoring & Evaluation

The Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA) program facilitates access to post-secondary education for Catholic sisters in Africa. Since 2013, over 1,600 sisters have participated in HESA, studying for college diplomas, bachelor’s degrees and master’s degrees.

ASEC partners with 24 higher education institutions* in the U.S. and operates in 10 African countries. Delivered through an innovative model, HESA students participate in cohorts of sisters at partner higher education institutions and receive technological and academic support to ensure their success as students, scholars and women religious.

HESA positions Catholic sisters as leaders of vital ministries, congregations and communities who address sustainable development in Africa. HESA is funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. The Foundation supported HESA from the beginning, providing a pilot grant through SLDI in 2012 and program-specific grants since 2013. The third phase of HESA (July 1, 2020-June 30, 2024) will support at least 522 sisters for undergraduate and master’s degrees.

2020-21 brought innovation and challenges as many sister students transitioned to online or hybrid models of study. ASEC responded to the emergent needs of sister students and university partners in Africa. As students moved to online studies, ASEC provided funds for internet data and other resources to ensure students’ success. Additionally, meetings with university partners in the U.S. and Africa were held at various points to address COVID-19 challenges and ensure students were continuously supported.

A collaborative effort among ASEC, university partners, national conferences of religious congregations and students made it possible for HESA to move forward in the face of unprecedented challenges.

Enrollments
As of July 1, 2021, approximately 950 sisters* were actively enrolled in HESA at partner higher education institutions in 10 countries in Africa. In the 2020-21 grant year, HESA welcomed approximately 300 new students* who formed cohorts and participated in orientation workshops in preparation for their studies.

Recruitment is ongoing and it’s anticipated that approximately 175 more sisters will enroll in HESA by June 30, 2022.

Graduations
To date, more than 600 sisters* have graduated from HESA with undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. During the 2020-21 grant year, approximately 150 sisters* graduated from the following HESA at partner institutions:

• Catholic University of Cameroon, Bamenda (Cameroon)
• The Catholic University of Ghana (Ghana)
• Holy Family Nursing and Midwifery Training College (Ghana)
• The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (Kenya)
• ChemChemi Ya Uzima Institute (Kenya)
• Tangaza University College (Kenya)
• Catholic University of Malawi (Malawi)
• Sacred Heart School of Nursing (Nigeria)
• Veritas University (Nigeria)
• Catholic University of Health and Allied Sciences (Tanzania)
• Mwenge Catholic University (Tanzania)
• Saint Augustine University (Tanzania)
• St. Francis Hospital Nsambya Training School (Uganda)

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A collaborative effort among ASEC, university partners, national conferences of religious congregations and students made it possible for HESA to move forward in the face of unprecedented challenges.

Enrollments
As of July 1, 2021, approximately 950 sisters* were actively enrolled in HESA at partner higher education institutions in 10 countries in Africa. In the 2020-21 grant year, HESA welcomed approximately 300 new students* who formed cohorts and participated in orientation workshops in preparation for their studies.

Recruitment is ongoing and it’s anticipated that approximately 175 more sisters will enroll in HESA by June 30, 2022.

Graduations
To date, more than 600 sisters* have graduated from HESA with undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. During the 2020-21 grant year, approximately 150 sisters* graduated from the following HESA at partner institutions:

• Catholic University of Cameroon, Bamenda (Cameroon)
• The Catholic University of Ghana (Ghana)
• Holy Family Nursing and Midwifery Training College (Ghana)
• The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (Kenya)
• ChemChemi Ya Uzima Institute (Kenya)
• Tangaza University College (Kenya)
• Catholic University of Malawi (Malawi)
• Sacred Heart School of Nursing (Nigeria)
• Veritas University (Nigeria)
• Catholic University of Health and Allied Sciences (Tanzania)
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Academic Achievements

In the 2020-21 grant year, approximately 100 students reported graduating with honors. At least 9 sisters’ received awards for best graduating student, best in department, or student leadership from their institution:

- Sr. Betty Namwazi, DM, Uganda - Marywood University & University of Kisubi, Bachelor of Education - University of Kisubi Meritorious Award for the Best Undergraduate Student in the Faculty of Education
- Sr. Mary Kalume, MSSMC, Uganda - University of Kisubi, Bachelor of Science in Information Technology - University of Kisubi Meritorious Award for the Best Undergraduate Student in the Faculty of Education and Community Technology
- Sr. Irene Atsiech Kwena, FRS, Kenya - The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Bachelor of Commerce - Valedictorian, Class of 2020
- Sr. Gloria Jacinta Ocho Adoga, SSND, Nigeria - Rosemont College & Veritas University, Bachelor of Business Administration - Head of Department Award for the Best Graduating Student in Business Administration
- Sr. Bridget Eze, CM, Nigeria - Rosemont College & Veritas University, Bachelor of Business Administration - Head of Department Award for the Best Graduating Student in Public Administration
- Sr. Juliana Uwosa Okofo, SHJC, Nigeria - Rosemont College & Veritas University, Bachelor of Business Administration - Head of Department Award for the Best Graduating Student in Public Administration
- Sr. Mildred Kaneng Pwajok, OLF, Nigeria - Veritas University, Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies - Head of Department Award for the Best Graduating Student in Religious Studies
- Sr. Gifty Anaaasia Blewu, SMMC, Ghana - Catholic University College of Ghana, Bachelor of Education - Overall Best Student and Best Female Student in the Faculty of Education
- Sr. Virginia Obiamaka Okoke, MSHR, Cameroon - Catholic University of Cameroon, Bamenda, Masters in Health Economics - Overall Best Student in the Faculty of Health Economics

Partnerships

In the 2020-21 grant year, HESA maintained 24 partnership agreements* with higher education partners in the U.S. and Africa. Since July 1, 2020, five (5) HESA partnership agreements* have been renewed.

Framework of Reference agreements were renewed between:
- ASEC & National University of Lesotho (Lesotho)
- ASEC & Holy Family Nursing and Midwifery Training College (Ghana)
- ASEC & Catholic University of Health and Allied Sciences (Tanzania)
- ASEC & Mwenge Catholic University, Moi (Tanzania)
- ASEC & St. Francis Hospital Nsambya Training School (Uganda)
- Uganda Martyrs University (Uganda)

MOU agreements were renewed between:
- ASEC, Chestnut Hill College (US) and Catholic University College of Ghana (Ghana)
- ASEC, Chestnut Hill College (US) and Veritas University (Nigeria)

Alumnae Network

The HESA Alumnae Network is continuing to grow as more students graduate. In 2021, more than 220 HESA alumnae* participated in ASEC Alumnae Workshops held in 10 countries in Africa. All ASEC Alumnae are invited to the workshops and over 50 sisters’ in attendance were alumnae of both the HESA and SLDI programs.

Alumnae Workshops were held both virtually and in-person and included sessions addressing child protection, human trafficking, safeguarding and time management.

Reflective Learning

Reflective Learning is an annual academic and professional development workshop that brings together HESA sisters studying at colleges and universities in each country. In the 2020-21 grant year, more than 800 enrolled HESA students* participated in Reflective Learning Workshops in 10 countries; 7 of these workshops* were held online due to COVID-19.

Workshop topics emerge from student recommendations and vary according to student and social needs in each country. This year, topics included self-awareness, research methodology, data analysis, emotional intelligence, stress management, gender based violence, child protection and human trafficking.

Students welcomed the opportunity to participate in online Reflective Learning Workshops for a second year. Topics and group discussions highlighted the challenges of COVID-19 in the sisters’ communities, in their personal lives and as students, who in most cases transitioned to online learning for all or portions of 2020. Discussions and reports from the workshops on including conducting research remotely, provided ASEC with valuable insights into student needs going forward.

You can learn more about the HESA program at asec-sldi.org/hesa.

Sisters Supporting African Communities Through Farming

Despite housing more than half of the Earth’s arable land, Africa imports more food than it produces.’ Limited access to land, finances and other critical resources have made it difficult for Africans to make a living from farming, which has led to poverty and malnutrition in rural areas and a migration of the younger population to cities and overseas.

But, Catholic sisters have seen how with proper support and investment, crop farming and animal keeping can successfully provide for their communities.

During an SLDI field trip to Kasii Organic Farming Project in Zambia, Sr. Veronica Nyanme, HRVM, not only learned about organic farming, but was also inspired to be innovative and to use the limited resources available to support her community.

She started with a variety of vegetables and is now also rearing hundreds of chickens, quails, peking ducks and guinea fowls. The congregation has also purchased a hatching machine with an 88 egg capacity.

You Can Sponsor an Alumnae Scholarship Program

Your generous donation can provide an education scholarship for a sister to build efficient and sustainable means of supporting her important ministry work. Just $85 pays for 1 month of a sister’s education.

Make a donation today by visiting asec-sldi.org/farming.**

HESA alumna Sr. Anne Kamene, ASN, has applied her education to develop a farm supporting the Cheshire Home for Girls in Kenya, which provides a residential and training program for 35 young women with varying mental and physical disabilities.

The home only buys about 5% of the food they eat; the rest of their food comes through donors and resources from their land.

In South Sudan, Sr. Mary Faida, SSHS, noticed during the pandemic how difficult it was for her neighbors to obtain healthy vegetables necessary for their nutritional well-being.

Because of what she’s learned in ASEC’s programs, Sr. Mary was able to immediately take action. She and her fellow sisters demonstrated how to plant vegetables using sacks and broken buckets on their veranda. Now her neighbors can grow their own food, even though they are renting and don’t own any land!

You Can Sponsor an Alumnae Scholarship Program

Through ASEC’s Scholarship Program, ASEC several sisters are studying Animal Health and Production at Kilaca Agriculture & Livestock Training Institute in Tanzania.

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Make a donation today by visiting asec-sldi.org/farming.

** References for this publication are available at asec-sldi.org/rays21.
ASEC’s Scholarship Program Bridging the Gap to Higher Education for Sisters in Africa

By Rosemary A. Shaver, M.Ed., ASEC Senior Program Manager, HESA & Scholarships and Tara Lapotofsky, Ph.D., CCLS, ASEC Senior Program Manager, Monitoring & Evaluation

Since 2012, ASEC’s Scholarship Program has been providing scholarships for sisters to complete secondary school or higher education credentials relevant to sisters’ ministries.

From 2012-2021, more than 500 sisters’ received scholarships through the program, which now serves sisters in Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Ghana, Kenya and Lesotho.

Approximately 270 scholarship recipients have graduated with an education that will assist them in their ministry work.

A 97% retention rate reaffirms that sisters who begin the program also tend to stay in the program.

Form-Level Scholarships

ASEC’s Scholarship Program was initiated in 2012 to meet the unique educational needs expressed by sisters in Tanzania, where 65% of women religious lack secondary education. ASEC partners with Bigwa Sisters Secondary School (Bigwa) in Morogoro, Tanzania to serve sisters in need of secondary school, or form-level, education. April 26, 2021, 22 ASEC-sponsored students graduated from Bigwa.

With college diplomas/certificates, sisters are able to receive training relevant to their ministry work. Scholarships often serve as a stepping stone for sisters interested in pursuing higher levels of education. Many of our scholarship recipients are not yet qualified for acceptance into the HESA program. Scholarships fill the education gap, so sisters can then continue their studies through HESA, which is grant-funded by the Hilton Foundation.

One such example is Sr. Fides Mlacha, FCSM, who was awarded a scholarship to obtain teaching credentials. Sr. Fides performed so well in the program that she was awarded a Certificate of Academic Excellence for Outstanding Performance in Education at graduation from Jordan University College, Tanzania in December, 2020. Sr. Fides has since been accepted into ASEC’s HESA program and is currently pursuing her diploma in Education and Religious Studies. Other sisters apply for the Scholarship Program to pursue more specialized degree programs related to their ministry work that may not be offered by our HESA partner institutions. Scholarships give sisters the ability to receive specialized training that’s relevant to their ministry work.

Pilot Doctoral Scholarship Initiative

In 2020, ASEC developed a pilot initiative under the Scholarship Program to support women religious in Africa pursuing doctoral degrees. Three (3) scholarships are awarded to the best applicants.

In 2012, Sr. Edna was initiated to ASEC’s Scholarship Program to pursue more specialized degree training at ASEC’s HESA program and is currently pursuing her diploma in Pharmaceutical Sciences, at Tangaza University College (2021).

In addition to her current studies, Sr. Esther teaches business studies and catholic religious education classes at Maryhill Girls High School in Thika, Kenya and serves as their business coordinator. She is also an adjunct finance lecturer at CUEA.

Sr. Fides Mlacha, FCSM, is pursuing a Ph.D in Financial Management at CUEA. In addition to her current studies, Sr. Esther teaches business studies and catholic religious education classes at Maryhill Girls High School in Thika, Kenya and serves as their business coordinator. She is also an adjunct finance lecturer at CUEA.

College scholarships are awarded to the best applicants. Depending on the level of support, students are awarded funding from one month of a sister’s education.

Higher Education Scholarships

In addition to form-level, scholar- ship recipients also attend programs in various disciplines such as education, medical science, social work, law, accounting and more.

ASEC’s Scholarship Program Alumna Now Serves as Pharmaceutical Technician in Tanzania

Sr. Edna is currently serving as a pharmaceutical technician at St. Benedict Ndanda Referral Hospital located in the Mtwara region of Tanzania. She and her eight coworkers are responsible for dispensing the medication for the entire hospital, an estimated 90-200 patients per day.

In 2012, Sr. Edna was one of the very first sisters to be supported through ASEC’s Scholarship Program. She is a shining example of how scholarships enable sisters to become a doctor. In 2019, she received her diploma in Pharmaceutical Sciences, made possible through sponsorship via ASEC’s HESA program.

In August 2021, 20 students from 8 congregations joined the program in Lesotho. They are studying at the high school (13), certificate (1) and diploma (6) education levels.

Program Expansion to Lesotho

In June, 2021, ASEC expanded the Scholarship Program to Lesotho to provide a bridge to higher education and enhance the vitality of congregations in the country.

Under the Scholarship Program, students are studying at the high school (13), certificate (1) and diploma (6) education levels. ASEC’s Scholarship Program relies on donations from our generous supporters to operate. Sisters apply to the program, and, depending on the level of support, are enrolled in the HESA program.

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Catholic sisters are called to embrace a loving reverence towards God and, by their charity, build bridges that serve the common good of humanity. As one of its core values, ASEC respects the special value, unique talents and gifts of each person created and sustained by God. ASEC accomplishes this goal through its core value of **reverence** that sets up higher value and inclines an individual to show honor and deep respect to other persons. Reverence integrates our beings, and in reverence, humility and charity are united into one virtue.

The **virtue of charitable giving** enables ASEC to be a blessing and a bridge for the women religious in Africa who receive training and education and, in turn, become shining **Rays of Hope** to the people they serve in their societies. Charity is one of the supreme virtues in which God’s mercy is passed on from one individual or group to another. Catholic sisters extend this charity through the services they offer across multiple cultures and communities, to the global north and south, operating with an appreciation for the uniqueness of every individual person.

In Africa, however, a majority of the sisters lack the skills they need to provide quality services most needed in their societies. By providing **access to training and education through ASEC**, sisters in Africa are able to impact and make a difference in the lives of millions of people through: education, health-care, fighting hunger and access to clean water and many more social needs in their societies.

During these challenging times of COVID-19, Catholic sisters in Africa continue to serve on the front lines, providing care, food and support especially to the sick and the most vulnerable in their societies.

ASEC relies on charitable donations, annual appeals, grant funding, mission appeals and other sources of income to support the training and education of Catholic sisters in Africa. ASEC’s Development Office builds on the existing successes to support the mission while developing innovative initiatives for fundraising and creative ways to engage and maintain relationships with donors.

Although the challenges of the COVID-19 global pandemic continue to significantly impact our development efforts, there have been positive outcomes in the year 2020-21:

- ASEC received several grants to support Catholic sisters in the Scholarship Program that offers two year certificate course in fields related to the sisters’ ministries.
- New relationships were formed as ASEC welcomed three women religious communities who joined ASEC as Associate Members.

### Challenges

The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have been significant and global and have significantly affected ASEC’s fundraising efforts. By providing access to education, sisters in Africa are able to impact and make a difference in the lives of millions of people through: education, health-care, fighting hunger and access to clean water and many more social needs in their societies.

### Will you join our efforts and be a Ray of Hope?

I invite you to join us and be part of our mission. Mindful of the difficult financial shortfalls due to COVID-19, we request you kindly to consider giving a gift to ASEC to help us continue our mission that serves those who live in the margins and are most vulnerable through the services offered by sisters in Africa.

Your contribution will make a huge difference and will help us impact the lives of so many people that the sisters in Africa serve. Thank you very much for your support. Be assured of our prayers for you and all your loved ones. Many Blessings.

You can make an online donation through our secure system by visiting asec-sldi.org/donate. Or, mail checks made payable to African Sisters Education Collaborative to 2300 Adams Avenue, Scranton, PA 18509.

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**Fun Fact**

**Sister vs. Nun - What’s the Difference?**

By Amy Fedele, ASEC Media & Communications Manager

The words “sister” and “nun” are used interchangeably in common speech, even amongst sisters, to describe women religious in the Catholic church. The distinction usually comes between “nuns” and “apostolic women religious.”

“Sister” is an all-encompassing term that applies to any woman who takes vows in a religious order (including nuns). All women religious take either solemn or simple vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

**Nuns** live, work and pray in a convent or monastery. They dedicate their lives to prayer for humanity.

Perpetual, solemn vows are taken by nuns in a public setting and recognized by the church as solemn. Nuns also give up all worldly goods including estates, endowments and inheritances.

Nuns live what is referred to as cloistered (enclosed) or semi-cloistered life. They live, work and pray within the monastery or convent, devoted to a contemplative life of prayer for the salvation of all.

Many cloistered nuns only leave the enclosure for serious reasons and on rare occasions. It’s rare that you would meet a nun in public.

For some orders of nuns, the rules of enclosure are a bit more relaxed.

**Sisters** actively live, serve and pray among us. They dedicate their lives to serving humanity, especially those in need.

All other sisters take simple vows that can be temporary or perpetual and are socially acceptable to use. Women religious is a more encompassing term when referring to both sisters and nuns. However, for some orders of nuns, the rules of enclosure are a bit more relaxed.

As you can see, there are several differences between nuns and other sisters. Women religious is a more encompassing term when referring to both sisters and nuns. However, **these terms are used interchangeably** and are socially acceptable to use.

Have questions about the lives of sisters? You can ask the ASEC staff on Facebook or your favorite social media site.
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We are grateful for your generous donations and continued support. Every single gift is so appreciated and so important to us. Please know that you are always in our thoughts and prayers. Donations between 9/1/2020 and 8/31/2021.

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- Sisters of St. Francis of Savannah
- Sisters of St. Joseph
- Sisters of St. Joseph Associate Group
- Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange
- Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace Generalate, Inc.
- Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament of Bengaluru
- Sisters of the Precious Blood
- Sneh Akrualva
- Society of the Holy Child Jesus
- Sr. Debra Fergus, LC
- Sr. Eileen M. Maguire
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- Sr. June Wakanuk, LSOF
- Sr. Kathleen Kelly, IHM
- Sr. Kathleen Lunsmann, IHM
- Sr. Kevin Carimi, LSOF
- Sr. Marjane Hosko, OSF
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- Sr. Mary’s Institute of O’Fallon
- Takisha Lowrey
- Taryn Theresa Gilb
- The Ancilla Domini Sisters ( Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ)
- Tinarta Maria
- Tony Diah
- Tysha McCray
- Valerie Lane
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- Veronika Karavsky
- Vincent and Elaine Fedele
- Winfred Mutindda
- Yolanda Summers

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Prayer During a Pandemic

By Sr. Chris Koellhoffer, IHM

Loving God, Holy One, Your desire is for our wholeness and well-being. We hold in tenderness and prayer the collective suffering of our world at this time. We grieve precious lives lost and vulnerable lives threatened. We ache for ourselves and our neighbors, standing before an uncertain future. We pray: may love, not fear, go viral. Inspire our leaders to discern and choose wisely, aligned with the common good. Help us to practice social distancing and reveal to us new and creative ways to come together in spirit and in solidarity. Call us to profound trust in your faithful presence, You, the God who does not abandon, You, the Holy One, breathing within us, breathing among us, breathing around us in our beautiful yet wounded world. Amen.

Special Thanks

ASEC Charter Institutions
- Chestnut Hill College and the Sisters of St. Joseph (CSS), Philadelphia, PA
- Marywood University and the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM), Scranton, PA
- Neumann University and the Sisters of St. Francis (OSF), Philadelphia, PA
- Rosemont College and the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ), Rosemont, PA.

ASEC Associate Members

Associate Members promote and further the mission of the organization, make a financial contribution, collaborate in ASEC programming and commit the president or major superior of the member institution as a representative.
- DePaul University, Chicago, IL
- D dzie of the Holy Redeemer (CSR), Meadowbrook, PA
- Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (CSS), Albany, NY
- Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati (SC), Mount St. Joseph, OH
- St. Leo University, Saint Leo, FL
- Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary (SNJM), Quebec, Canada
- Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM), Dubuque, IA
- Daughters of the Holy Spirit (DHS), US Province, Putnam, CT

Special Thanks
- Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Inc., Westlake Village, CA
- Franciscan Sisters of Chicago (FSC), Lemont, IL
- Sisters of St. Casimir (CSS), Chicago, IL
- Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM), Dubuque, IA
- National Catholic Community Foundation (NCCF), Cranwoville, PA
- Servants of Mary (Sister Sisters) of Ladymarh
- Towanda, PA
- University of Scranton, PA
- University of Mary Washington, VA
- Pontifical Mission Societies - Diocese of Scranton, PA; Archdiocese of Philadelphia, PA; Archdiocese of Newark, NJ; Diocese of Brooklyn, NY; Diocese of Greensburg, PA; Catholic Diocese of Erie, PA
- Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), Washington, D.C.
- ASEC Board Members
- ASEC Partners in Africa
Let me take a few moments to reflect on my experience with ASEC’s programs. First, where I have been involved to facilitate a few workshops with the sisters under this program. Second, my observation working with them in my own backyard, the Archdiocese of Blantyre, Malawi.

Indeed, I have had opportunities to facilitate workshops with several groups of ASEC being its Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA) Orientations, Reflective Learning or Alumnae Workshops. What has always struck me is the choice of themes to cover. I have always found them to be challenging, relevant and enriching. They are both informative and formative, which for me is what the church and society at large need. It does not help to do themes that just remain academic and can’t be applied in the real daily lives of the participants or that hardly make a difference in one’s ministry and apostolate.

I must say, that ASEC program in this regard is giving the African women religious to wrestle with the contemporary challenges of both the church and society. It is my hope that the future ASEC will not divert from this approach as we clearly see that the religious today are more effective in the manner they are living their varied charisms and in the way they approach ministry.

This brings me to my next and second point. The expectation of both the sponsors and the organizers of the ASEC programs is that they change, contribute and influence the events of the world through the women religious who undergo these programs. This is only possible if we have women religious that are effective on the ground as they live their charism and are engaged in pastoral work.

Most of the religious members who have undergone this program are demonstrating that. We are able to see in them qualities like confidence, orderliness and result-oriented in the manner they approach ministry.

In the alumnae, we are able to see tangible successes within their own personal lives, within their congregations and in the Archdiocese of Blantyre, Malawi. As mentioned earlier on, we have the religious, who are demonstrating that they have come to make a difference and to offer to both the church and society an alternative way of living as Christian and as a good citizen. Noticeably, they are able to engage and challenge the people and move them toward change and development. We see them helping the local church and the local communities to become more self-reliant, which today is a very noble and urgent project.

"ASEC programs need to be commended and encouraged," says Rev. Fr. Dr. Alfred Chaima. "We pray that the sponsors continue to invest in these programs."
Today in Africa...

- A child will recover from malaria, thanks to a Catholic sister who has dedicated her life to healing the sick.
- That same sister now uses her education to keep her community healthy through local medical clinics.
- A village has food to feed their previously starving population, thanks to the education of a Catholic sister.
- That same sister now builds a sustainable farm so villagers in rural areas won’t have to go hungry again.
- Orphaned boys are rescued from the streets and are receiving an education, thanks to the efforts of a Catholic sister.
- That same sister now dedicates her life to mentoring abandoned children so they can become the future leaders of Africa.

Become a *Ray of Hope*

We are committed to alleviating poverty in Africa through the education of Catholic sisters... Sisters who are already working where help is needed most. Will you join us? Donate today and make a big difference for years to come. Your impact is a great blessing!

**Donations support ASEC's Scholarship Program,** which bridges the gap to higher education for African sisters in Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Ghana, Kenya and Lesotho by providing scholarships to complete secondary school or receive higher education credentials relevant to their ministries.

Will you become a *Ray of Hope* and support the education of women who are serving in poor communities across Africa?

**The impact of your donation:**

- $20 provides **one week** of education for a Catholic sister
- $85 = **one month** of education
- $250 = **three months** of education
- $500 = **six months** of education
- $1,000 = **one year** of education

Make an online donation through our secure system by visiting [asec-sldi.org/donate](http://asec-sldi.org/donate).

Or, mail checks made payable to **African Sisters Education Collaborative** to 2300 Adams Avenue, Scranton, PA 18509

Contact us at anytime by calling 570.340.6089 or visiting asec-sldi.org.

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More Ways You Can Help

Here are some of the ways you can support our ASEC sisters.

- **Fundraise**
  By setting up a [Facebook fundraiser](http://facebookfundraiser.com), you can raise awareness and collect donations on behalf of ASEC.

- **Share**
  When you share, comment and like our social media posts, you help us get our story out to more people.

- **Shop**
  Select ASEC as your charity of choice on [Amazon Smile or eBay](http://amazon.smile.com) and they will donate a portion to ASEC.

- **Volunteer**
  Sign up for our e-mail newsletter to learn about volunteer opportunities and ways to get involved.

- **Donate**
  Just $85 pays for one month of a sister’s education! Be a *Ray of Hope* by making a donation today.

Visit [asec-sldi.org/Rays21](http://asec-sldi.org/Rays21) for more information.