

The God of Surprises . . . Surprises Again!
Africa: The Call to Help Religious Orders
By Friar Keith Douglass Warner

My teaching at Santa Clara University is coming full circle to connect with my religious life, in ways that astonish me. This past summer, two organizations representing religious orders in Africa requested formal partnerships with Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship, where I am Senior Director of Education and Action Research. Both male and female religious orders have asked the Center to train them to apply innovation and entrepreneurship techniques to their social ministries in Africa. The leadership of the Center is now poised to undertake a significant effort in helping them create new models of serving the poor, protecting the planet, and fulfilling the vision of *Laudato Si'* in Africa.

Executive Director, Thane Kreiner attended the Third Vatican Impact Investing Conference in July. (Thane, by the way is not a Catholic.) This is a gathering of Catholic leaders to push forward an agenda of converting conventional forms of investment into practices that fulfill the Catholic social vision. Sister Eneless Chimbali, a Servant of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is Secretary General of the Association of Consecrated Women of East and Central Africa (ACWECA), also attended this conference. She heard Kreiner explain the concept of social entrepreneurship and asked Thane if the Miller Center could help. She suggested the Center enter into a formal, multi-year partnership to help Sisters' congregations in East Africa to assist them in finding new ways to organize and fund their ministries to the poor, as well as provide leadership formation for their congregations.

ACWECA represents 300 congregations in 10 countries, representing some 40,000 Catholic Sisters in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. Most of their congregations were founded in Africa, and many of them are quite poor, facing significant financial and organizational leadership challenges. Many of the Sisters are Franciscans. They are responding directly to needs of many very poor people, but with almost no material resources. When I first heard of this request, I thought it was a nice idea, but not feasible. To my astonishment, the leadership of the Miller Center responded very positively; then a donor stepped forward with a gift to help us begin the partnership.

In June, Miller Center received a formal request from the Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar to initiate a series of training sessions to help members of its 20 social ministry centers to learn and apply our methodology of social entrepreneurship. These centers serve migrants and refugees, foster climate-resilient agriculture for smallholder farmers, and engage in political advocacy for policy solutions and against corruption. They also offer education and training for children and young adults, provide health care services and health education especially to those with HIV. Now that most of the European Jesuit missionaries have returned home, these centers recognize that they can no longer rely on grants from Europe, and that they must find a new path to financial sustainability. At the same time, they share a broad consensus that social entrepreneurship offers a suite of innovative approaches to extending their missions to the poor, especially unemployed

youth. These Jesuits are pursuing a new strategy of development for Africa, and they want to use our methodology in social entrepreneurship to model this.

I write this note as I am returning from Kigali, Rwanda, where I recently co-led a workshop for the center directors and two representatives of the Sisters' association. It was successful, and quite well received. Travel to and from East Africa is time consuming, inconvenient, and uncomfortable. However, the opportunity to work with members of religious orders from the African continent, a place where the Church and religious life are growing and where the needs are so great – is very exciting. I still find great joy in mentoring young adults in the fellowship program I developed starting in 2012. But I feel that this new avenue of ministerial service is an important development in my own vocation, a call within a call. I have been meditating on Paul's dream in the Book of Acts in which he receives an invitation to cross from Asia Minor to preach in Macedonia! Please pray for me as I undertake this journey to a new frontier.