

*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Capacity Building: A Phenomenological Study of the African Women Perceptions and Experiences in the Leadership Training Program**

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**The promotion of leadership skills among women leaders in developing nations is essential in order for change and progress to occur in these countries. In this phenomenological study, we examined the perceptions and experiences of nine women religious of Africa who were engaged in a three-year leadership development initiative in three developing nations: Kenya, Uganda, and Ghana. We described how, by subsequently practicing acquired leadership skills, these women brought about change in their educational, health care, social and pastoral ministries. Data were collected using in-depth interviews, observation of the changes in the participants' ministries, and field notes. The findings indicated that leadership development training enhanced participants' capacity for effective service delivery and allowed for the expansion of their ministries, thus improving life for their people. Participants engaged their communities constructively and positively transformed their projects.**

**Keywords:** women in leadership, skills development, capacity building, transformation

### **Introduction**

Much has been written about the need in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) for quality leadership (Maathai, 2006; Masango, 2003; Moss, 2007; Obiakor, 2004, Ugwegbu, 2001). For example, ubiquitous political upheavals (Leonard & Straus, 2003; Moss, 2007) indicate the need for a systemic change through the development of high-quality leaders who will augment the productivity of organizations and enhance the quality of their performance. Bell and Morse (2003) asserted that quality leadership is vital to both the improvement of community participation in functional, consultative and interactive ways, and the propagation of a shared vision. Moreover, quality leadership is a source of competitive advantage (McCall, 1998). Accordingly, organizations invest in leadership development to improve human and social capital. Given the fragile human situation in SSA, leadership development might be a viable strategy for advancing organizations and for augmenting investment opportunities. To borrow from McCauley (1998), leadership development refers to those activities which enhance leadership knowledge and skills within an individual or organization and which promote the transfer of these skills in order to maximize performance.

Although a multitude of studies focused on leadership models in core nations, far fewer are those studies indicating the necessity of good leadership and governance in the sub-Saharan region (Leonard & Strauss, 2003; Obiakor, 2004;) or the need to encourage women to assume leadership positions (Kabala, 1993; Sikazwe, 2006). In SSA, despite decades of cultural inhibitions that impeded leadership development in women, it is becoming increasingly necessary for women to be more visible and to take on decision-making positions. In order for women to assume leadership positions, it is imperative that they be enabled to build their leadership skills and self-confidence. Salvaterra et al. (2009) found that gaining leadership skills enhanced women's self-confidence, improved their communication skills, and gave them the technological know-how needed to manage their organizations (ministries) effectively.

The women religious of Africa operate ministries which respond to that continent's humanitarian crisis by providing housing, education, health care and social services to the elderly, orphans, HIV/AIDS patients, battered women and

abused girls, and refugees. The term, *women religious*, refers to women who have taken vows of chastity, poverty and obedience (Canon Law, 607-709) and who give their life to serve humanity. They belong to a religious institute established under Catholic Church Law (Canon Law 607-709). They endeavor to attain a common purpose by responding generously to the needs of humanity. These women are also commonly known as Catholic Sisters or nuns. These women religious have been known to provide meaningful services to all by inculcating holistic development regardless of religious affiliation (Masaku, 2007). Despite their enormous contributions, there is little empirical research documenting the achievements of women religious in Africa or of the challenges they face. However, a case is made here that providing skills development for women in the sub-Saharan region might be a strategy for engendering change and development.

This study examined the experiences of nine women from among the 340 African women religious enrolled in the innovative Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI) program. The program is implemented in five sub-Saharan nations: Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. The goal of the program is to provide leadership skills for women religious so that they can expand their ministries and address the sufferings of their people amicably. We argue that leadership development for these women might be an essential strategy to enable them to expand their ministries and deliver quality services to an increasingly needy population despite ever-fragile situations in the region.

### **Need for Women in Leadership in Sub-Saharan Region**

Studies have demonstrated that there are few women leaders or role models for women in the sub-Saharan region (Maathai, 2006; Sikazwe, 2006). Moreover, sub-Saharan cultures have historically excluded women from leadership positions and confined the work of women to the home environment. Researchers have suggested that excluding women's input by holding back their involvement in education, leadership, and financial and social progress has a negative impact on development and society at large (Bauer & Brinton, 2006; Chisholm, 2001; Kevane, 2004; Lucas, 2001; Mutindi, 2001). The result of such exclusion is that women become dependants rather than active co-producers, which deals a loss to the economy. Accordingly, encouraging women to take on leadership positions in corporate and not-for-profit organizations is beneficial not only to the women themselves but also to the entire society, since shared leadership roles may bring new perspectives.

In a study conducted with rural women in Zambia, Sikazwe (2006) established that there is a need for leadership development for women in order that they might overcome cultural hindrances and assume leadership positions in their communities. Sub-Saharan cultures have played a significant role in inhibiting progress for women by propagating rigid views of women's place in society. Kevane (2004) asserted that

women were required to focus their energy on the private and personal sphere as mothers of the home and family, while males were occupied in the public world of commerce, politics, and civil administration. Such inhibition prevented females from pursuing their ideas and thwarted the self-confidence required to take on leadership roles in corporate and public spheres. To this day, the role of gender ordering prevails in SSA.

The majority of sub-Saharan African women continue to face both internal and external barriers. Internal barriers result from the effects of cultural socialization and societal stereotypes, while external barriers include social constructs that block the majority of women from taking leadership positions (Chisholm, 2001; Marshall, 1997). For example, research by Entounga (2000) demonstrated that women have experienced social disadvantages and reduced access to the self-development opportunities essential for full participation in community development. In a study examining the global factors affecting women's participation in leadership, Bullogh (2008) established that factors affecting women in countries with few women leaders are different from the factors affecting women in countries that have more women leaders. In SSA, there are very few female role models in political and corporate leadership. Therefore, enabling women in leadership positions to become more visible in their leadership styles and more effective in their service delivery might encourage more women to pursue the path to leadership.

For women to participate in leadership, increasing their enrollment in education and enabling them by providing leadership development programs are both vital. Analysis of literature on women in SSA suggests that there is a need for increased female enrollment in schools and skills-based training for women, both of which augment leadership skills—a viable channel for engaging and strengthening women's leadership roles, community participation and socioeconomic progress (Lucas, 2003; Robinson-Pant, 2004; Robinson-Pant, 2004; Tripp, 2004). Given the opportunity for self-development, sub-Saharan women have the potential to plan projects, obtain resources, manage finances, and improve life for their people and society. For example, a study conducted to assess the viability and success of microcredit programs for women in Africa, Kevane (2004) found that women who engaged in these programs steadily improved their lives and the lives of their families, and had the potential for future success and social and economic returns. In addition, their bargaining powers improved because of their ability to access credit and invest in a variety of projects. However, because these women had inadequate leadership and management skills, some women made poor investment decisions. They could not predict market situations. As a result, they lost their investments, which made it difficult for them to repay their microcredit loans.

In search of their own economic empowerment, sub-Saharan women initiate and manage small self-help associations and

take on income-generating projects in order to improve their economic base (Maathai, 2006; 2009; Masango, 2003; Miguel, 2005; Mutindi, 2001). These self-help associations facilitate the creation of “rotating savings” to improve women’s bargaining positions, strengthen community and civic participation, and enhance social connection (Mbugua-Muriithi, 1997, p. 38). Rotating savings refers to the monies contributed by women to an account from which members may borrow to undertake a particular business enterprise and repay the loans with minimal credit (Kevane, 2003). Through such borrowing initiatives, women engage in viable projects such as buying property, building water reservoirs, investing in agriculture, and the creation of small businesses. Over time, association members build a social niche in which they network and support each other. Although most initiatives report considerable success (Kevane, 2004), some projects fail to yield the desired benefits because of poor entrepreneurial skills. Therefore, incorporating a broader vision for long-term investment, quality leadership and management training and accountability might augment best practices, thus ensuring grassroots and organizational development to spur change in the sub-Saharan region.

#### **Role of Women Religious and Need for Leadership Skills**

Much literature documents the work of women religious in the west (Conway, 2004; Draigler, 2000; Melia, 2000; Schier & Russett, 2002). For example, researchers have explored recent historical and social development literature on women religious in the United States and Canada (Coburn & Smith, 1999; Conway, 2004; Smyth, 2004) and noted the role of these women in advocacy in social justice, in elementary and higher education, in the healthcare system, and in social and pastoral services. Women religious in Europe and North America have been praised for their successful and altruistic endeavors to establish and run schools, colleges, hospitals, social service agencies, and institutions promoting community development.

The work of Tracy Schier and Cynthia Russett (2002) assembled ten essays that discuss the challenges and other relevant elements of Catholic women’s colleges in the United States, which were primarily established and managed by women religious. Similarly, the work of Draigler (2000) provided an inventive survey of the challenges and achievements of women religious. Taking into consideration their commitment to education in a time when educating women was taboo, Conway (2000) descriptively analyzed the phenomenon whereby “women religious orders founded women’s colleges that became intellectual centers within which the question of knowledge and faith had to be reconciled” (p. 13). Indeed, women religious broke many barriers, and so encouraged women’s self-development in the church and in society.

Unlike the women religious in the West, little has been studied about the women religious in the sub-Saharan region despite their contributions to poverty eradication and the significant services they provide to deprived populations. Therefore, the

narratives provided by studies from the West are an inspiration to women religious of other continents, who are prompted to share their own stories of success and of the challenges they face in establishing their place in society and steering their development agendas. The courage of women religious in Europe and the United States encourages women religious of Africa to become ambassadors of hope and development to their people in the sub-Saharan region. They too have a story—one that is still in the making and so not yet fully told. We argue that providing a planned leadership development resource might be a strategy to increase abilities and offer new perspectives for these women as they work to expand their ministries and render meaningful services that meet the ever-increasing needs in the sub-Saharan region.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the perception and experiences of nine women religious participants of the Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI) program. In addition, we examined the impact of the leadership training program on the women participants and how the participants transferred the knowledge and skills into their workplace to transform their ministries in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda by applying the skills they learned.

#### **Description of the Program**

The program is the Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI), which was inaugurated in 2007. A grant award from the Conrad Hilton Foundation to the African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC) enabled the creation of the SLDI program. The overarching goal of the program was to provide comprehensive leadership training to women religious of Africa in order to assist them in developing projects in their ministries that would contribute to the economic and social growth of the people they served. At the onset, seven program objectives were outlined. Curriculum was developed that would facilitate the participants’ ability to (a) transfer the skills and knowledge needed for effective project and financial management, (b) develop creative and effective leadership skills, (c) identify and mobilize resources, (d) expand their knowledge of development issues that impact the socio-economic and political life of individuals and communities, (e) enhance their human relationship skills, (f) develop and implement strategic plans, and (g) develop plans to ensure sustainability of the participants’ ministries (SLDI Program, Handbook, 2007).

To attain these goals, five training sites, one in each country, were selected. A total of 340 women religious from 109 religious institutes in five countries, namely, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, were enrolled. These participants enrolled in one of three tracks: administration, project direction, or financial management. Most of these women had been trained in their area of specialty as nurses, teachers, social workers, and pastoral workers but had no leadership or managerial training. Because of the demands in their ministries, these women were required to perform

additional leadership roles that often fell well beyond the scope of their professional training.

The participants converged at the training site in each country for five two-week training workshops over a three-year period. The instructors were from the United States and Africa. At the end of each training session, participants developed an action plan based on the skills they had learned in that session and how they were to practice or implement these skills. They were instructed to implement the action plan they had developed during the training session. Upon returning for the next training session, the participants were to report their experiences, including the successes and difficulties they encountered in practicing and implementing the action plan. The instructors were to provide guidance and feedback on the strategies to improve implementation. In order to establish viable strategies,, the trainees were also required to mentor and/or train at least three people in their ministries, and report their progress to instructors.

Overall, the program aimed to enhance the creative and critical problem-solving skills of the women religious, so that they could promote meaningful productivity and performance in their ministries, where they would also integrate acquired knowledge and transfer acquired skills. The program followed a model of “theory-practice-theory”, whereby participants attended a two-week session and then practiced and/or implemented their gained skills within their ministries.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Both the SLDI program and this study are framed by the transformational leadership model theorized by Bass (1985). This model facilitates change through implementation of new ideas. The focal point of the theory is raising the individual’s consciousness by inspiring, motivating and enabling the stakeholders (Bass, 1985; Pounder, 2008). A transformational leader encourages change through critical reflection, having a clear vision, communicating the vision, building the relationship, establishing a supportive culture, leading by example, and promoting goals implementation; under such leadership stakeholders are invited to identify and achieve higher-level needs and goals, and transformation may occur as a result. A transformational leader empowers the stakeholder to exceed their previous accomplishments (Bass & Avolio, 1990). Following a transformational leadership model, the SLDI training program works to increase the leadership abilities of women religious. As a result, the knowledge and skills these women acquire raises their consciousness to achieve higher level goals in their ministries and communities not only through practice of new skills but also through the training and mentoring of colleagues. In this way these women religious spur development and growth in their ministries, where they are also encouraged to inspire, motivate, and enable, and to collaboratively bring about change.

### **Research Setting and Methodology**

In this research study, we utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach is embodied in social and cultural experiences. It enables researchers to describe the meaning of the lived experiences of several individuals as they pertain to a concept, practice, or occurrence (Creswell, 2007; Giorgio, 1992; Van der Mescht, 2004). In this research, the approach provides the basis for describing the perceptions and experiences of the women religious—“what it is like for the participants” to be in a leadership program and to practice the skills gained in their ministries.

We used a phenomenological approach to navigate the data collected from the nine trainees by describing the participants’ perceptions and the experience and the meaning they attach to those experiences. Then, by observing how the participants practiced and implemented the skills in their ministries, we made a determination on the impact of the leadership program. The prototype leadership training program is described as a phenomenon because it is not mundane for the participants. Studying the participants’ perceptions and experiences in the program provides relevant information on how they adopted and practiced the new skills to manage their ministries. Perhaps the leadership approach can be used to enable women in Africa to develop their abilities so that they may participate fully in community development.

We designed an instrument to determine the participants’ perceptions and experiences in the leadership program. In April-May 2008, we conducted a pilot study consisting of five women religious. The purpose was to ascertain that the language used in the interview questions was clear and understandable to trainee participants. The pilot study provided relevant information to revise the interview questions. The following questions were used in the interview process: (a) “Can you describe clearly and concretely a significant experience in a training program when you felt you had received enriching input that may have changed your ability?”; (b) “What were the most useful skills that you gained in the leadership program?”; (c) “Giving examples, can you explain how you used or practiced or transferred the skills to your ministry?”; (d) “How would you describe the leadership program in relation to the skills you gained?”; and (e) “What are the difficulties/challenges you may have experienced in learning and in practicing the skills?”. The interview questions helped the participants to reflect on the experience, knowledge, and skills that they gained in the program and how these translated into their work and ministries. Interview questions were designed to elicit meaningful and significant stories of the participants’ perceptions and experiences. The data collection process took place over a period of three months, from June to August, in 2008. On-site visits, face-to-face interviews, and observations were the methods of data collection. Interviews lasted for 45 minutes to 1 hour and were audio recorded.

## Participant Sampling

The study is composed of nine self-selected SLDI participants from three training sites in Kenya, Uganda, and Ghana. We visited the program sites from June through August of 2008 to recruit the participants. The criteria for selection included enrollment in the SLDI training program and completion of two program sessions—at that time, the program was in its second year of implementation. To recruit participants, we described the research objectives to all the participants and requested volunteers. Because the number of volunteers exceeded the three participants needed for interview from each site, random numbers were drawn from a container and the first three were picked. The nine volunteers were provided with an informed consent letter describing the purpose of the study as well as its potential benefits and risks. In addition, they were informed that the interview could be discontinued at their request without penalty. Next, the interviewee and the researcher identified an appropriate time and location for an interview; each interview session lasted for about one hour.

The true names of the nine participants are withheld to protect their anonymity. Participants' statements on their perceptions and experiences were aligned and transformed into clusters through a process of phenomenological reduction (Creswell, 2007, Moustakas, 1994). Meanings were formulated from the phrases and statements by reading and re-reading the transcripts, and were aligned to develop themes (Creswell, 2007). The meanings were derived after reflection and interpretation of the participants' perceptions, experiences, and changes that resulted in their ministries.

## Findings

Prior to data analysis, we read through the data transcript in its entirety, making marginal notes as if “conversing with the data” (Merriam, 1998, p.179). Data was then chunked into meaningful sections and labeled to correspond to the research questions. Then a description of each piece of data relative to a particular question was read in its entirety, themes were identified, and codes were developed accordingly. Finally, using the data transcripts and themes developed, 110 important statements were extracted from the interview scripts. The phrases articulated the participants' perceptions on the usefulness of the program, the skills they acquired, and the changes that resulted in their ministries.

The finding of the demographic inventory collected from the participants included age, leadership position, job position, and education level. The general interview included the following questions, refined from versions used in the pilot study: (a) “Can you describe clearly and concretely a significant experience in the training program when you felt you had received enriching input that may have changed your ability?”; (b) “What were the most useful skills that you gained in the leadership program?”; (c) “Giving examples, can you explain how you used or practiced or transferred the skills to your ministry?”; (d) “How would you describe the leadership

program in relation to the skills you gained?”; and (e) “What are the difficulties/challenges you may have experienced in learning and in practicing the skills?”.

## Demographic Information

The nine women religious interviewed had attended at least three sessions in the leadership program, and their average age was 42 years. All of them were in active ministry, either as a project manager, bursar, teacher, nurse, accountant, social worker or pastoral worker. They had varying levels of education, ranging from college diploma to some college to high school diploma. Their professional occupations are tabulated in Table 1. Overall, two major themes emerged from the significant statements that were extracted from the interviews: capacity building and leadership development that results in community transformation. These themes are described with supporting statements from the interview transcripts.

## Capacity Building

When the interviewees were asked to describe the most useful skills they gained, the descriptions they provided indicated an enthusiasm for their participation in the leadership program, specifically because the content and skills learned were relevant to their ministries. They drew attention to the pertinent skills they had developed, such as the capability to identify needs or problems in their ministries and to design projects that directly addressed these needs. Ninety-five percent of the interviewees agreed that they had developed intellectual, interpersonal and communication skills, all central to effective team building. When asked about the useful skills they had gained, a participant said the following:

I used to be very shy, during the group discussion, after learning about communication skill, I was able to present our group views to the class, and my colleagues listened to my point of view... I can now effectively conduct a group meeting without much fear.

Another expressed the following:

I feel confident and competent to apply financial skills in my accounting work; I am competent in areas such as capital budgeting, bank reconciliation, use of petty cash vouchers, and computer for accounting work...I did not learn these skills in my previous training.

There was a general feeling that the program enabled participants to develop the capacity to implement skills and to engage communities to participate, which was significant in practice and in obtaining the desired changes. A general sense of self-confidence prevailed among the participants, which was demonstrated by a common feeling of competency and a high level of leadership abilities development.

When asked how they practiced or transferred the skills they had learned in their ministries, participants were eager to talk

about their experiences. They reported that the leadership training had a practical approach that enabled them to implement the skills as soon as they learned them, unlike the college experience, where they learned skills but had to wait until they had gained employment before they could use them. In Ghana, a participant explained her experience the following way:

I was trained as a teacher but not as an administrator or a fundraiser...the skills I have gained in the leadership program have helped me to improve on my administrative skills ... the course is so practical...I had never developed an action plan or [one] that connected the skills I learnt and the issues I was to address in my work ...this is a very different approach from what I learned in college.

Such an expression provides evidence that the training simultaneously interwove theoretical and practical application of the knowledge and skills that resonated with participants' ministerial needs and experience. The participants who were not in leadership positions in their workplaces explained that they had experienced some resistance in implementing the new skills. They said that it was not easy to influence their colleagues who had not attended the training. However, after the colleagues were mentored in the new skills, they appreciated and were eager to apply the skills in their ministry.

Mentoring was required; each participant was to mentor at least three people in their workplaces. The findings reveal that mentorship was very successful because almost all of the participants had either mentored or conducted a workshop to educate their colleagues or community members. By each of the nine interviewees meeting the minimum mentoring requirement, a total of 27 people would have been mentored; however, five of the interviewees mentored seven people, so that in fact the total number of people mentored was 44. In addition, the interviewees conducted seminars for over 270 employees, coworkers, and community members as part of their capacity building strategies. Capacity building in their communities and ministries was clearly evident through mentorship and training. One Ugandan participant, who was a social worker and project manager, enthusiastically described her mentoring experience the following way:

I was eager to teach the staff and my colleagues...we arranged for a community workshop and 36 people participated...we are implementing the skills in schools, and in the health care centers and our community...I taught about communication and interpersonal skills, group dynamics, delegating responsibilities, developing memos and taking minutes in a meeting...these skills are important for a strong organization.

Participants described a level of transformation in their leadership styles and abilities. They provided concrete examples of the practical change that had resulted after being in

the program. A Kenyan participant who is in charge of a street family development program said the following:

...without this course I would not have known how to write a successful grant proposal...there are quite a few changes I have made in my work, all because of the skills I have gained in this course...I wrote a grant to a local bank to expand the school...I was so happy when I was informed by the bank officials that my grant proposal was successful among a hundred applicants ...I have used the funds to build two classrooms.

And in Ghana, a participant emphasized how the program had enabled her to bring change in the life of the local women's development program:

I have helped to transform life for poor women and their families...they can grow fruits, vegetables and do better farming, [and] I owe it all to this training...I learned how to communicate with the community and conduct meetings to encourage them to do farming... I taught them better farming methods, crops that can yield...I will never be the same...I can see the fruit of my work.

There were powerful and profound statements that indicated a level of personal growth, confidence, and change, as well as the development of critical thinking skills and the application of acquired skills within individual ministries.

### **Leadership for Community Transformation**

When asked to describe the leadership program in relation to the skills they had gained, participants said that the skills acquired in the training program reinvigorated their ministries. In Kenya, Josephine affirmatively expressed that "the training has created a difference in my life, it has made me to think differently and develop new perceptions...I now involve the staff and teachers in planning and carrying out the plans...[and] work has become a lot easier." This is an indication of a level of openness with staff and also of the ability to trust and delegate responsibilities that is essential to teambuilding and collaboration in order to achieve development initiatives.

A participant in Uganda asserted, "the course has strengthened my leadership capability... [and] it has been a journey for growth"; another participant in Ghana elaborated, "I have never had any computer skills...I am excited on how computers make work easy and one can accomplish so much in little time...I now use Excel spreadsheet to do accounts and produce reports." The data analysis shows that participants developed essential skills comprising the ability to communicate effectively with clarity and precision, the ability to listen, and the ability to work in teams with self-confidence—which enabled them to discover their innate potential. These skills afforded an expansion of the circle of individual persuasion and participation that is essential for collaboration and organizational progress. The program was also an opportunity

for professional development and an opportunity to use a computer.

The skills gained were not of sole benefit to the individual but also promoted community engagement initiatives—a phenomenon facilitated by the African concept of collectiveness, whereby an individual has no identity separate from the community. In African cultures this concept is an integral part of daily life, and positively influences the way people interpret their environment and their society. For example, upon gaining skills, the participants quickly mentored their colleagues and conducted workshops in order to empower and enable the entire community for effective change. A participant described her approach the following way:

I mentored eight employees...I found mentoring as an opportunity for self-discovery, I reflected on the skills I gained and how to utilize them in my ministry as a teacher, to promote cohesive relationship with the employees...this has helped to stimulate change in the school.

Another participant in Uganda observed the following:

I have trained 40 employees from the school and health care facility on managerial skills, teambuilding, facilitation, [and] planning...this has contributed to positive outcomes evident in collaborative teamwork in [the] school and health care facility.

And in Kenya, a participant said, “I have trained 18 community members in conflict management, communication and teambuilding...they are so eager to learn more and practice the new skills”. In Ghana, a participant emphasized:

I am able to mobilize local women’s groups effectively... I have been able to begin a palm oil processing plant to help local women improve their lifestyle by making palm oil for cooking and soap for domestic use... these women are capable of earning a wage to support themselves and their families.

Incredible transformation in the participants’ ministries has been credited to the leadership program. There has been an increased level of awareness, innovation and creativity in women that has positively affected their communities and ministries through enhancing development. The majority of the participants were encouraged by the amount of information they gathered and learnt from each other. As one expressed, “the course has helped us to realize that we are all struggling to address the challenges of our people... this is a great encouragement because I realized that we need to come together often to discuss on ways to improve our ministries.” The participants developed a level of collaboration in searching for solutions to the problems in their ministries and for ways to help their people. Seeking ways to provide better services, they looked forward to engaging in collaborative efforts even after leaving the training site and returning to their ministries.

Analysis of the data on participants’ experiences and skills-implementation shows that the session’s content and curriculum were relevant to their ministerial needs, as evidenced by their ability to recognize challenges and solutions. Participants were able to integrate what they learned into their real life experiences—namely, the services they administered to the people. Interaction with the participants, and observation of the way they practiced acquired skills in their ministries to expand their projects, engage in constructive decisions, and hold training seminars and workshops, revealed that the leadership training had provided an avenue for change and progress to the ministries.

### Discussion

Analysis of the participants’ perceptions and experiences in the leadership training program shows the program’s impact in participants’ performance and the ensuing change in their ministries. Difficulties in securing sources of funding for projects were reported, as were difficulties in training colleagues due to their demanding schedules. However, the trainees remained connected, and worked in teams even after returning to their ministries. This helped them to discuss and solve most of their challenges. The findings suggest that women religious and, in general, all SSA women are in critical need of leadership skills with which they might facilitate change in their communities and ministries. Adopting the diffusion of innovation theory (Roger, 1992) might provide a viable approach to the transfer of leadership. This theory identifies five stages, which include attaining the knowledge, persuasion, deciding to transmit the skills, implementation and confirmation. Clearly, these stages were evident in the SLDI leadership program; participants obtained the skills, and then taught and mentored others while at the same time practicing the skills and making informed decisions. As a result, there was change both in their leadership styles and in their ministries.

The findings suggest that investing in leadership training can promote a significant level of social and economic transformation in Africa, because the skills attained enabled the participants to generate programs that address the needs of their people. Although there are a variety of methods that can be used to bring about development, leadership training has proved to be a key variable in the transformation of mental models, the elevation of individual consciousness, the increase of self-efficacy, and the generation of confidence in tackling problems and widening problem-solving vision (Edoho, 2001; Gilley, 2005). Researchers have asserted that quality leadership development and practice is essential for sound progress in Africa (Chisholm, 2001; Maathai, 2006) As such, enabling women who are managers in healthcare facilities, schools, and social ministries might be a significant factor in the expansion of their ministries and in their ability to offer quality services.

Social learning theorists (Bandura, 1986; Harrington, 2005) suggested that people make meaning in their lives through questioning the occurrences around them; then, individuals

organize those meanings in their experiences—through human interaction (Bell, 2008). Thus the leadership development training provided an opportunity for women religious to learn, and then to assign meaning to their learning by connecting it to their own lives and experiences. The results may have included self-discovery and a questioning of the underlying reasons for their continued underrepresentation in corporate, political, and community leadership. New perspectives and self-confidence as leaders emerged where participants made huge steps in fundraising, grant-writing, networking, and in enabling life-changing events for other women in their communities.

Leadership development seemed to increase the ability of these women to be advocates, disseminate information, and encourage others to assume leadership roles in the community. Through the retelling of their experiences, they explained how they carved out their own career paths, in the hope that others would follow these pathways. Although the women religious who participated have leadership opportunities in their ministries that are mostly geared towards poverty eradication, the leadership training provided them with an opportunity to develop new perspectives, which in turn allowed them to question best practices in order to transform and develop the projects they manage. As a result, changes took place in their work; participants developed new perspectives which enabled them to shift their thinking, and so engage in better leadership styles and better community organization. The skills they developed were essential to the strengthening of requisite relationships in their communities, and to the increase of awareness, high level teamwork, and collaboration. These skills were also necessary for the initiation of creative development projects, such as establishing palm oil production, purchasing desks for schools, securing library funds, building classrooms, and managing rotating credit investments.

Leadership training plays a definite pivotal role in societal and ministerial transformation, and enables reforms that shape people's lives through increased productivity and community participation (Merriam & Ntseane, 2000). Participants demonstrated increased levels of courage and creativity, showed negotiation skills, and became action-centered to initiate and drive change. They affirmed through their testimonies that the leadership training helped them to realign their work, and to involve the stakeholders in strategic planning. As one participant reported, "The course is a huge eye opener to me on the issues of financial management...I am able to use the computer to generate reports...I can claim to have computer skills, that have broadened my understanding, and increased confidence and competence in financial management." An increase in the level of expertise led to adaptation of new and better strategies to plan and store financial information.

The pertinent change evident in the participants' conception and implementation of skills suggested that leadership training is a tool that can facilitate change in Africa. Mezirow (2000)

asserted that people bring about change through making meaning out of their experiences and allowing their frames of reference to undergo transformation. When viewed through the lens afforded by the transformational leadership model (Bass, 1985), it is evident that huge changes occurred in the participants' ministries within a short period of time. Participants explained that at first some of their colleagues were not enthusiastic about the new knowledge, skills, and behaviors. Eventually, after they themselves were trained and mentored, these stakeholders responded positively in support of the new initiatives; collectively, they worked together and quality outputs were reported. For example, outcomes included successful grant writing and grant implementation, the construction of new classrooms, the purchase of school equipment and computers, the creation of self-reliance projects, and the mobilization of women's groups for social support and income-generating initiatives. Personal internal leadership changes could not be quantified; in the words of one participant, "the course has helped me to become a good leader and listener...internet skills have helped me to be connected with other people through opening [an] email account...actually communication has become easier and faster...also this has improved my preparation of reports, organizational and administrative skills...the course has changed my community."

Providing leadership training can be a way to support aspiring women leaders in sub-Saharan Africa by instilling confidence and a inspiring strategies for the removal of barriers they face (Chisholm, 2000; Salvatera et al, 2009). The leadership training encouraged the women religious to follow best practices, and increased both their awareness of socio-cultural barriers and their relevant skills—which they then utilized to unearth obstacles hindering progress in their ministries. Over 90% of the trainees reported engaging in a variety of development activities, such as (a) creating jobs, (b) educating the community, (c) mentoring staff, and (d) using technology to improve the quality of their work. Bernadette, a participant, expressed that "the course has helped us to transform our communities...we are more resourceful and aware of more ways to mobilize and use resources...we have created jobs for poor women through production of palm oil."

Leadership training promoted capacity building. Capacity building refers to actions that lead to an increase in the collective power of a group to improve economically, socially, educationally, culturally, and politically (Hudson, 2005). It also describes the ability of a community to help individuals address and alleviate their economic challenges by strengthening community initiatives (Felkins, 2002; Mezirow, 2000), such as self-reliance programs, economic sustainability programs, and poverty eradication initiatives. An increase in knowledge and skills raised the level of consciousness of the participant and stimulated her intellect to become more creative in nurturing social and economic change. Participants embarked on activities to build a multifaceted organizational capacity and to



increase effectiveness through networking. Kibbe et al. (2004) suggested that partnership and networking in the community are essential; in order to provide effective services to the poor, leaders must engage and collaborate with them in development projects. This encourages them to take responsibility for making vital decisions in the initiative. Building the skills of women religious has increased their capacity to network and to tackle the problems that plague their communities (Fewick, 2001; Harrington, 2005). For example, one participant identified a significant accomplishment that elated her spirit: she wrote a successful grant proposal and was awarded \$3,500 to construct classrooms for street families.

Overall, leadership training is an investment. The changes induced in participants' ministries indicate that leadership training is a vital gift to women in sub-Saharan Africa which enables them to stimulate change. On-the-job training is a viable way to develop creative and critical problem-solving skills that are applicable to their situations; it is also a strategy to transform their socio-economic base, since participants come to understand the barriers that have prevented their progress. Obviously, Africa's strength lies in the social networks which are invisible to people unfamiliar with the culture (Commission for Africa report, 2005).

Studies have linked transformation leadership with innovation, creativity, (Hinkin, 1999), identity, motivation and courage, (Marques, 2007), change and generating ideas (Sosik, 1997). Transformational leadership is positively linked to participants' learning goal orientation, suggesting that individuals have intrinsic interest in their work (Hinkin, 1999). It enhances leadership effectiveness through individual growth and change (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978), which is the result of motivating and enabling colleagues. Leadership skills change an individual to a 'new self' (Quinn, 1996). Also, transformational leadership is highly correlated to the concept of transformative learning (Kristskaya & Dirkx, 2000). Mezirow (2000) observes that upon gaining leadership skills, new viewpoints emerge as individuals question their previous understanding and sense-making habits and alter their existing ideas to follow a new course.

Although cultural, socio-economic, and political transformation is an arduous process that cannot be achieved in one day, women religious are gradually constructing the schema to drive desired change through insight and skills development. As transformational leaders, women could now foster intellectual curiosity, facilitate creativity, and stimulate progress in their ministries and communities. They have embarked on a vibrant transformation process that is gradually yielding sustainable effects. The impact of transformational leadership theory, which was pertinent in the training model, is now practiced in the participants' skills utilization. Indeed, participants have implemented relevant strategies that operate to improve their vision in order to achieve progress. However, they need support and encouragement to persist as agents of change. The road to

development is the creation of a compelling vision of change relevant to a given situation (Fairbanks, 2000; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). These women have marked out their path by adopting an action model to help implement desirable skills so that they can meet the needs of the people they serve.

### **Significance and Implications of the Study**

Clearly, positive change was reported by the participants in their communities and their ministries as a result of participating in the leadership program. The program provided a new approach to management issues and increased the viability of human capital through an enabling innovation. As a result, the trainees have acquired technical competence, increased ability to plan and perform administrative jobs in their professions, and an integrative propensity to shape and integrate theory into practice. Obviously, there is need for more studies to ascertain the effects of leadership development on women in Africa. The current research focused on a single leadership program; the findings indicated a need for more leadership training. Follow-up studies on various programs might provide relevant data on ways to engage women of Africa and unearth the challenges they face as leaders in their ministries.

This phenomenological study must be understood in the context of the leadership training as perceived and experienced by the participants, and as reflected in the skills they subsequently practiced. The skills deemed important were those that they applied within their ministerial context. Different perspectives may emerge if the staff and the community served by the participants are interviewed. Future phenomenological studies might examine the perception and experiences of the stakeholders, staff, and community, and might consider how they internalized the changes brought about in their ministries by the participants of the leadership training. Researchers agree that leadership training instills fresh ideas and a greater sense of agency (Debebe, 2009; Hill, 2003;), both of which are required in order to spur change in sub-Saharan women. In her research on transformational learning among women leaders, Debebe (2009) established that leadership training enhances the insights that lead to real change in the leadership styles and practices of women.

This research has added an awareness that grassroots leadership training has meaningful benefits, since favorable outcomes trickle down to the community much sooner than they do with national programs, where leadership is concentrated at a higher level with little or no input from rural communities. Also, personal benefits were highlighted, and can be summarized as self-awareness and change of perspective; both of these benefits enabled participants to carry their responsibilities in a new direction. The findings agree with Mezirow's (2000) notion of transformative adult learning, which creates a shift in understanding and behavior in order to filter leadership experiences. Although individuals may have changed their perspectives, the ministries and environments of participants

have not changed. This situation could create difficulties in the implementation of the new skills. For ease in adaptation, future leadership planners may need to consider and integrate strategies that would enable the participants to design knowledge and skills dissemination workshops and learning activities at home in their ministries. The results presented in this paper were drawn from the nine participants' perceptions, experiences, and demonstrated transfer and performance of skills midway through a three-year program. To confirm extended findings and objective measurements of these data after participants' completion of the program might provide more relevant outcomes.

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