



1999-2007

# FOUNDING MOTHERS

*25th Anniversary*

2024 Special Research Report

Detailing ASEC's Founding





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# INTRODUCTION

The African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC) is an international nonprofit organization with a mission to educate Catholic women religious in Africa to strengthen their leadership capacity to provide services that address local and global challenges. ASEC delivers educational programs to Catholic women religious in Africa in recognition of their unique needs and vital contributions to integral sustainable human development. Women religious who are graduates of ASEC programs dedicate their lives to service by improving the social, healthcare, educational, environmental, and economic conditions and spiritual enrichment of individuals, communities, and society in Africa.

ASEC was officially established in 1999 by the leaders of four institutes of women religious and the presidents of the colleges and universities founded by those institutes in Pennsylvania. ASEC's founding institutes include—Sisters of Saint Joseph of Philadelphia (SSJ) and Chestnut Hill College, Congregation of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) and Marywood University, Sisters of Saint Francis of Philadelphia (OSF) and Neumann University, and the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ) and Rosemont College. These eight institutes are the Corporate Members of ASEC. The women religious leaders, who were members of the founding institutes and were key to ASEC's inauguration, have come to be known as ASEC's Founding Mothers. ASEC's Founding Mothers include—Sr. Anne Munley, IHM, PhD, Sr. Kathryn Miller, SSJ, PhD, Sr. Marcia Sichol, SHCJ, PhD, Sr. Carol Jean Vale, SSJ, PhD, Sr. Mary Reap, IHM, PhD, Sr. Marie Lucey, OSF, and Sr. Anita Cattafesta, OSF.

After 25 years of service to the women religious of Africa, the ASEC 25th Anniversary Research Project endeavors to capture the dreams and aspirations of ASEC's Founding Mothers, which led to the establishment of ASEC all those years ago. The ASEC Founding Mothers can be envisioned as many roots anchoring a single large tree, ASEC, with its programs as branches, and the countless leaves sprouting from those branches the fruition of its local and global impact. It is hoped that by better understanding ASEC's roots, its history and origins, ASEC will be better equipped to serve the women religious of Africa for years to come.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of the ASEC 25th Anniversary Research Project is to tell the origin story of ASEC from the perspective of the women religious who were integral, at various stages, to the development of the collaborative. A qualitative case study approach was used to gather and analyze the lived experiences of ASEC's Founding Mothers. It was theorized that the history of ASEC, particularly its founding (i.e., 1995-2007), would be enriched by collecting, analyzing, and integrating the personal dreams, visions, and experiences of ASEC's Founding Mothers.

## METHODOLOGY

Individual interviews were conducted with each of the six Founding Mothers from August to September 2023. Individual interviews focused on collecting the Founding Mothers' unique perspectives on ASEC's establishment. In addition, two focus groups were conducted with all participants, the research consultant, and select ASEC staff members in attendance. In July 2023, the first focus group provided participants an introduction to the project and prepared participants for their individual interviews. The final focus group, in March 2024, was conducted to complete participant validation of anticipated results and conclusions. Further, extensive document reviews of published documents (e.g., ASEC historical newsletters, timelines, and internal and external reports), Neylan Commission Meeting Minutes (1999-2000), and ASEC Board Meeting Minutes (2001-2007) were conducted in August 2023 to provide context and structure for ASEC's historical timeline.

Data was analyzed using the constant comparative method, typical of qualitative data analysis. Interview transcripts and document review results were reviewed and placed into open coded categories, which were then analyzed and sorted into larger overarching themes. Results are broken down into two main categories—The Founding of ASEC, detailing the collaborative's establishment and key steps in the process from the participants' perspectives, and The Founding Mothers' Experiences, which provides the participants' personal context and reflection on ASEC's establishment. Each main category is then organized by theme.

Meet the

# FOUNDING MOTHERS

of ASEC

## Sr. Anne Munley, IHM, PhD

### Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary

Sr. Anne Munley, IHM, PhD's involvement in ASEC's founding began in the early 1990s in her position as President of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary congregation and United States Delegate to the International Union of Superiors General, Rome, Italy. Sr. Anne also served as ASEC's first Executive Director from 2006 to 2007. In the Fall of 2007, she was inaugurated as the 11th President of Marywood University, holding the position until she retired in 2016. Sr. Anne continued to serve on ASEC's Board of Directors until 2016 when she moved to San Antonio, TX and resumed work with religious congregations and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.



## Sr. Kathryn Miller, SSJ, PhD

### Sisters of Saint Joseph

In 1999, Sr. Kathryn Miller, SSJ, PhD, served as the Assistant to the President of Chestnut Hill College. In this capacity, she was integral to ASEC's founding, recognized as Coordinator of ASEC activities until 2006. Sr. Kathryn is still very much involved with ASEC and is currently an Emerita Charter Member of ASEC's Board of Directors.



## Sr. Marcia Sichol, SHCJ, PhD

### Society of the Holy Child Jesus

In 1999, Sr. Marcia Sichol, SHCJ, PhD, then the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ) American Province Leader, was one of the founding members of ASEC. In 2005, working as a consultant to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, she and Sr. Anne Munley, IHM, were instrumental in preparing the original SLDI grant proposal. She also served as ASEC's Interim Executive Director in 2017. Sr. Marcia is still actively involved with ASEC and is currently a Charter Member of the ASEC Board of Directors.





In 1999, seven women religious in the United States dreamed of a way to meet the educational needs of Catholic sisters in Africa, these women have come to be known as ASEC's Founding Mothers. ASEC's Founding Mothers are the first to tell you that they did not embark on this journey alone. From the beginning, they collaborated with the institutions they represented, other key stakeholders, and most importantly the sisters in Africa. Although there are many others who have made ASEC what it is today, the seven Founding Mothers are recognized in this report for their inspiring contributions at ASEC's inception.



### **Sr. Carol Jean Vale, SSJ, PhD**

#### **Chestnut Hill College**

In 1999, Sr. Carol Jean Vale, SSJ, PhD, was in her second term as President of Chestnut Hill College, a position she continued to hold for 30 years, retiring in 2022. Sr. Carol was the founding Chair of ASEC, a position she held for over ten years and in more recent years served as Vice Chair and Chair of ASEC's Board of Directors. Sr. Carol has continued her service to ASEC as a member of the Sustainability Committee.

### **Sr. Mary Reap, IHM, PhD**

#### **Marywood University**

Sr. Mary Reap, IHM, PhD, became involved in ASEC's founding in 1999 as President of Marywood University, where she served from 1988 to 2007. Prior to her tenure as President, she taught at elementary, secondary, and college levels. From 2009 to 2017 she served as President of Our Lady of the Elms College in Chicopee, MA.



### **Sr. Marie Lucey, OSF**

#### **Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia**

Sr. Marie Lucey, OSF, became involved with ASEC's founding in 1999 as the Congregational Minister for the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia. After completing her time as Congregational Minister, she served for eight years as Director of Mission and Advocacy for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. In 2011, Sr. Marie began working for the Franciscan Action Network as Director of Advocacy and later Associate Director. As a longtime advocate for peace and social justice, she continues to be an active supporter of ASEC's mission today.

### **Sr. Anita Cattafesta, OSF**

#### **Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia**

Sr. Anita Cattafesta, OSF, became involved with ASEC's founding in 1999 as the Director of Sponsorship for the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia (OSF). Sr. Anita also served in various positions of administration at Neumann University for 14 years. Sr. Anita had particular interest in serving African Catholic sisters and spent five years in Kabwe, Zambia teaching at St. Augustine's Major Seminary. Sr. Anita passed away on October 6, 2022 at the age of 91.



# The Founding of ASEC



Left to Right: 2004 ASEC Conference, 2006 Site Visit to Bigwa, 2005 Blessing of Kenya Computer Lab

## SETTING THE STAGE - WHY AFRICA?

In the early/mid 1990s there was increasing concern about the situation of religious women in Africa, as many lacked the higher education they needed to lead their congregations and communities. Congregations in Africa did not have the resources to fund the higher education of all of their sisters and sent a few sisters abroad to study. Catholic colleges and universities in the United States, especially those founded by congregations of women religious, would welcome and sponsor sisters from different parts of the world, especially Africa, to live and study with them.

For years, Chestnut Hill College, Marywood University, Neumann University, and other Catholic institutions sponsored a small number of African sisters to study at their institutions each year. The intent was to support the sisters as they attained a degree so that they could return to their country and work in education, similar to the education movement within the United States Catholic institutes of women religious. Though it was difficult for the African sisters to adjust to an unfamiliar culture, after living in the United States for four to six years, some sisters decided not to return to Africa, and for those that did, they found it difficult to reintegrate back into the culture in their home country. However, for the United States institutions, it was not possible to sponsor more than a few African sisters at a time. As Sr. Mary commented, the number of sisters that the colleges were able to serve “was like a drop in the ocean” compared to the immense amount of requests received each year. Sisters Anne, Mary, and Carol Jean recall that informal conversations between the congregation leaders and college/university presidents would focus on the need to do something that would increase the number of religious women in Africa that would have access to higher education.

This concern became an issue for sisters’ networking groups  
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such as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) in the United States and the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) in Rome. In 1995, the plenary session of the UISG in Rome focused on the concern for the well-being of Catholic sisters in Africa. Sr. Anne was able to arrange a breakout session for major superiors of English-speaking African countries to openly discuss the educational needs of the religious women in their countries. Sr. Anne was surprised that 55 African congregational leaders attended the session, indicative of the overwhelming interest in the topic. She commented that as they listened to the stories of the African sisters they were drawn to the honesty and awareness in which the leaders shared the challenges of their communities. The need for education for sisters in Africa was paramount. The management of local schools and social service agencies was becoming the responsibility of African sisters’ congregations and, for many reasons including fewer vocations and financial issues, the capacity of European and American congregations to continue present levels of support was decreasing. The African sisters needed the skills and education to assume these responsibilities. Hearing the African sisters’ desire for access to training and education fueled the idea of partnership with them to develop a way to increase educational opportunities for their congregations.

## FORMING THE COLLABORATIVE

As increasing educational access to the sisters in Africa was beginning to become a theme of discussions at international, national, and regional meetings, it became very clear to the Founding Mothers that a new plan would need to be developed to meet the needs of the African congregations. The idea of trying to provide education to the sisters in their home countries in Africa, instead of in the United States, was beginning to emerge. Sr. Margaret



Gannon, IHM, of Marywood University, traveled to East Africa in 1998 on a sabbatical leave to explore the feasibility of providing online degrees to the sisters in Africa.

One of the forums that the Founding Mothers used to discuss the potential of providing increased educational access to the African sisters was at meetings of the Neylan Commission, which met in conjunction with the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU). The Neylan Commission was established in 1978 and provided a networking structure for the leadership of United States Catholic women's colleges and universities. Both Sr. Mary and Sr. Carol Jean served as Chair of the Board of the commission at various periods of time. In October of 1998, Neylan Commission member institutions and their founding congregations were surveyed to ascertain what types of outreach activities/projects they were engaged in. The goal of the survey was to explore ways in which these two groups of institutions might work together for the good of the Church, for the benefit of higher education, and to preserve the legacies of the founding congregations. At a Neylan Commission meeting in December of 1998, Sr. Mary presented the idea of using technology (i.e., distance education) to educate sisters in Africa so that they might in turn educate others.

In October of 1999, the Neylan Commission held a follow-up meeting at the College of St. Elizabeth to discuss the findings of the Sponsored Outreach Activities/Project Inventory Survey previously circulated. ASEC Founding Mothers—Srs. Carol Jean, Mary, Anne, Kathryn, and Marcia were among those attending. Several members of Region 3 of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious also were present. One of the potential projects presented was a distance education program provided in collaboration with African congregations to increase access to higher education for their sisters. Though the commission did not embrace the idea of becoming the sponsor of this project, the sisters from Pennsylvania decided that they were willing to pursue it and see what they could do to make it happen.

On December 13, 1999, a pivotal meeting was held, marking the beginning of the African Sisters Education Project, which is now ASEC. College/university presidents, congregational leaders, and grant writers from Chestnut Hill College, Marywood University, Rosemont College, and Neumann University met to continue the discussion on education of religious women in Africa. Attending were Srs. Carol Jean, Mary, Anne, Kathryn, Marcia, as well as Sr. Patricia Kelly, SSJ, Margaret Healy, Mary Leahy, Cheryl Simpson-Whitaker, Lorraine Aurely, and Frances Griffith. Sr. Marie was absent but sent information prior indicating that Neumann University and the Sisters of Saint Francis of Philadelphia were willing to be involved. As the group agreed to move

forward with the project, initial plans were discussed including strategies to seek funding, piloting the project in English speaking countries in East and West Africa, and most importantly finding ways to engage the sisters in Africa as active partners. Sr. Carol Jean commented that from the beginning, the project was to be "totally collaborative" with no hint of "colonialism"; the African women religious had to be included in the planning and development, from the ground up. From the start, it was recognized that only with consultation and partnership between African and American sisters could any authentic progress be made in pursuing the goals of the organization.

It is significant to note that the development of this project with African sisters demonstrated a unique collaboration between United States higher education institutions and their founding religious institutes. Sr. Carol Jean said, "one of the richest experiences was getting to know the presidents, the provincials of their congregations, and to work with them as well as my colleagues in higher education. It's just been an incredible journey."

Shortly after this, the Neylan Commission began to dissolve and the remaining funds of the commission were awarded to the developing African Sisters Education Project.

In April of 2000, the stated goal of the project was "to transform African society through the education of women religious, building the nation and Church." Sr. Anne wrote at the time that the group felt that by engaging in the project we "can receive more than we can give."

Funding of the project was a critical goal. The funds from the Neylan Commission did provide some seed money and the group's respective institutions were providing some funds, but the project was going to need substantial funding over time. The Founding Mothers recalled the frustrations of the first meetings when time was spent trying to identify some celebrity or national group that might fund the project. As Sr. Mary said, without the money, "it was just a dream." Around this time, Sr. Marcia was working for the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters and was instrumental in the submission of a \$20,000 planning grant, which funded travel to Africa to initialize and maintain connections with congregations in Africa. The goal of the trips was to gather additional input from African congregations and collect information necessary in planning the project.

As the group continued to meet, it began to form its own identity and confirmed that it was an independent project founded by the four colleges/universities and congregations in Pennsylvania (ASEC's Corporate Institutions). It was also determined that higher education for teachers was to be the focus of the project. In April of 2001, the name of the

organization officially became the African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC).

The first formal use of the ASEC name was in the presentation of a survey to African religious superiors attending a UISG meeting in Rome in May 2001. In order to further involve the African congregational leaders in the planning of this project, a Needs Assessment Survey was developed by Sr. Anne to gather information regarding educational circumstances and needs of the congregations in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Ghana, and Nigeria. Several members of ASEC were in attendance at the UISG meeting—Srs. Anne and Marie, as well as Sr. Patricia Kelly, SSJ and Geraldine MacCarthy, SHCJ—each assisted in leading the discussion of the project.

The results of the survey, completed by 36 African congregational leaders, were analyzed and presented to ASEC at a meeting by Sr. Margaret Gannon, IHM. The survey results provided direction for the next phase of ASEC's development, including identifying the initial three countries for the project, the steps needed to ensure online delivery was viable, and the educational area of focus (secondary education, with a focus on religious studies and/or science).

### **BRIDGING THE GAP - FACT FINDING & PLANNING**

At the LCWR regional meetings, a discussion was taking place related to the way the founding institutes and higher education institutions could work together. It was clear, because of the strength of the national conference in the United States, that the parallel structure that ASEC should work with would be the national conferences/associations in the African countries. ASEC needed to explore the educational requirements in each country, the institutions already offering degrees, as well as the availability of technology, housing, transportation, and other resources.

In 2002, another Hilton Fund for Sisters planning grant was used to support Sr. Michelle Puma, SHCJ, to spend two months in West Africa—Ghana and Nigeria. Several months later, Sr. Anne and Sr. Annmarie Sanders, IHM, traveled to East Africa and met with congregational leaders in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania to build relationships and identify the availability of technology for advancing the education of sisters. During their trip, Sr. Anne and Sr. Annmarie visited the Bigwa Secondary School in Morogoro, Tanzania. The school belonged to the Tanzania Catholic Association of Sisters (TCAS), the national conference in Tanzania, and it served several hundred girls and sisters from 22 congregations. The school was located in a rural, impoverished area, with 15 books in the library and science labs in bad repair. Many of the Tanzanian sisters had not completed high school and were not prepared for higher education. As a result of this trip, one of the first initiatives of

ASEC was to commit to providing the equipment and renovations needed for the Bigwa Secondary School to build two science labs, so that the sisters could advance from an "O" level to the "A" level needed to qualify for higher education. In order to support the Bigwa project, more than 100 letters requesting funds were written by ASEC to colleges and universities and the religious congregations who founded these institutions.

Sr. Anne traveled to Africa again in 2003 and met with the leadership of TCAS in Tanzania to develop plans to provide intensive preparation courses in English and mathematics for students entering Form I at the Bigwa Secondary School.

Though the fact-finding trips were extremely useful and served to build collaboration and a foundation for ASEC, it was decided that African project coordinators, who would be the "feet on the ground," would provide the support necessary to implement and maintain the collaborative. In June 2003, the Hilton Fund for Sisters awarded ASEC an additional \$20,000 to support Sr. Anne as the United States project coordinator and four coordinators in Africa. Funding the coordinators provided some financial support to the African congregations and ensured further collaboration and partnerships with the African sisters.

The selection of the African coordinators was another example of collaboration, so necessary to maintain a true partnership between ASEC and the African sisters. Between 2004-2005, Sr. Anne visited the national conferences/associations of women religious in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda, in order to discuss the need, the purpose, and identification of ASEC African coordinators. Thus building some of the first formal connections that would result in the vital and vibrant partnerships ASEC has with the national conferences/associations of women religious in Africa to this day.

In an effort to remain African centered and to be sure that curriculum requirements would be met by the program, ASEC reached out to the Catholic University College Ghana (CUCG) to inquire about collaborating with them as a site for sisters' distance learning. However, CUCG did not have the capacity to partner at that time but were interested in collaborating on such a project in the future. This potential partnership, although not realized at the time, would not be forgotten and fulfilled nearly ten years later.

As the months went by, organizational development of ASEC continued and the first ASEC mission statement was developed in 2003. It stated, "our goal is to increase access to education in Africa by helping to educate religious women and enabling them to acquire credentials for teaching, healthcare, spiritual, or social service ministries in



their countries.”

Though the partnership between ASEC and the African congregations had been growing through international meetings and trips, it was decided that a mutual gathering in the United States would provide the opportunity for the African sisters to be purposefully engaged and truly partner with the ASEC leaders in the planning of the project. Sr. Mary said “we wanted to do it with them and not for them.”

Women Religious Bridge the Gap: Collaborative Education for Service was held near Philadelphia, PA in September 2004 for 18 African sisters who were identified by their national conferences/associations as holding leadership positions and working in educational settings. The goal of the conference was to strengthen the collaborative partnership that would result in making higher education more accessible to religious women in Africa via local and distance learning. The conference was funded by the Connelly Foundation and the Hilton Fund for Sisters. Each sister received a laptop computer provided by the sisters of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. All of the Founding Mothers were involved and provided significant contributions to the conference’s planning and execution. The conference included sessions for sharing and reflection, as well as technology demonstrations at Chestnut Hill College and Marywood University. Sr. Anne provided the keynote address, “Realizing the Dream.” As Sr. Kathryn explained, “we weren’t telling them what we were going to do for them, instead we were all sharing what ASEC could be...it was all about mutuality.” On the last day, the African sisters gave a presentation of what they were interested in, what they wanted to happen. They said they wanted computer labs that could be used as training centers for the sisters and they expressed the hope that this could happen as soon as possible. The Founding Mothers remember one sister who stood up and declared, “I’m going to build a college for women,” demonstrating how engaged they were in ASEC’s mission. Sr. Kathryn reflected, “they really, really, wanted to educate their sisters.” The conference created a context where the partnership, that was at the heart of this project, could emerge. Sr. Anne recalled that the plan of action that was developed was actually the direct recommendation of the sisters from Africa, “we knew they were the ones to tell us what to do.”

For most of the African sisters, the 2004 ASEC Conference was the first time they had traveled to the United States. Stories of the violence in large cities had made them and their families fearful that harm may come to them on the streets of Philadelphia. Sr. Mary commented that for them to come, despite their fears, demonstrated their level of commitment and desire to be a part of ASEC’s mission. “Being here must have been very scary for them, but they

# ASEC Key Events

## March 1995

Attendees of the [UISG Plenary Meeting](#) explore growing concern for the life and ministries of African women religious.

## December 1999

Formal discussion of the African Sisters Education Project begins at the [Neylan Commission Region II Meeting](#).

## April 2001

Group began to [use the name the African Sisters Education Collaborative \(ASEC\)](#) and decides to focus on teacher higher education because that is most needed in the African countries they are looking to serve.

## December 2003

ASEC’s [first mission statement is developed](#), “to increase access to education in Africa by helping to educate religious women and enabling them to acquire credentials for teaching, healthcare, spiritual, or social service ministries in their countries.”

## February 2004

ASEC’s [first logo is designed](#) by Sr. Francine Fasolka, IHM.

## September 2004

The [Women Religious Bridge the Gap: Collaborative Education for Service Conference](#) is held near Philadelphia, PA with 18 African sisters in attendance.

## January 2005

[First official ASEC U.S. Project Coordinator](#), Sr. Kathryn Miller, SSJ, is appointed.

## March 2005

[ASEC Board of Directors is established](#) via the creation of ASEC Bylaws.

## June 2005

ASEC begins [opening computer labs](#) in Africa.

## March 2006

Sr. Anne Munley, IHM, PhD is appointed [ASEC’s first Executive Director](#) and ASEC’s office is established at Marywood University.

## June 2006

ASEC is incorporated as a [501\(c\)\(3\) Organization](#).

## October 2006

ASEC begins [collaborating with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation](#) on SLDI.

## January 2007

Sr. Anne Munley, IHM, PhD is appointed President of Marywood University and ASEC begins [search for second Executive Director](#).

## February 2007

The [Hilton Foundation awards ASEC \\$2 million grant](#) to launch SLDI over a 3-year period.

## April 2007

The [first SLDI Workshops](#) begin.

were filled with life and hope and energy and fearlessness.” Sr. Carol Jean said, “the joy and spirit of these women was contagious. They were the happiest people I have ever met in my life.” The experience of the conference was extremely important for the African sisters and the United States sisters who were hosting them. Sr. Mary shared that she felt so honored that the African sisters were here, “sharing with us and accepting us as their sisters to work with them.” The African sisters’ commitment to the Church, religious life, and the education of the sisters in their communities served to deepen the Founding Mothers’ passion. The 2004 ASEC Conference was “a turning point” in the project. It put names and faces on the sisters ASEC was trying to serve and increased the Founding Mothers’ determination to move ASEC forward. The conference inspired collaboration, cementing the “sister to sister” focus. Sr. Carol Jean clarified this saying “the camaraderie, the respect, and the relationships that were formed because of that meeting really helped carry us into the future and set the tone for the way that we interacted with each other.”

### **BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE - COMPUTER LABS**

Technology or the lack of it in Africa was a major challenge for ASEC. The fact finding trips and the information given by the African sisters at the 2004 ASEC Conference near Philadelphia, confirmed the belief of the Founding Mothers that the use of technology was going to be key to facilitating distance learning, but also that computer laboratories needed to be established in order to provide the technology training that the sisters needed. Visits to Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Ghana were made in 2005 by Sr. Anne to identify sites for the computer labs. The sites selected would be managed by the national conferences/associations and in many cases remain the sites where SLDI workshops are held today.

The first Basic Technology Workshops were held in the Summer of 2005 in Nairobi, Kenya and Cape Coast, Ghana. Thirty six sisters, from five African countries participated in the workshops facilitated by Sr. Lisa Olivieri, SSJ, Chestnut Hill College and Sr. Kathleen Burns, IHM, Marywood University. The goal of these basic workshops was to prepare the sisters for distance learning. The workshops were sponsored by the Hilton Fund for Sisters and the Franciscan Sisters of Chicago (FSC). The laptop computers were donated by Irv Rothman at Hewlett Packard Financial Services, ASEC, and other individual donors.

Additional desktop computers were donated by Hewlett Packard and sent to Uganda to establish the ASEC computer lab. Some of these computers were also sent to the Bigwa Secondary School and the Episcopal Center in Tanzania. In order to establish a computer lab in Nigeria,

funds were raised by letter writing because of an embargo on American goods. By March of 2006, a computer lab had been established in each of the five African countries ASEC wished to serve—Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Uganda, and Nigeria.

In discussing the establishment of the computer labs, Sr. Anne commented on the commitment of Ann Henry, Vice President of Hewlett Packard, and a Marywood University board member. After hearing Sr. Anne talk about ASEC and the need for computer labs in Africa, Ann Henry committed to traveling to Africa to see the sites and facilitated the large donation of Hewlett Packard computers to ASEC. Sr. Anne recalled a significant experience from this trip to Uganda, she, Ann Henry, and the African sisters they were traveling with were stopped by armed soldiers, their documents were taken, and they “had to sit there and hope that you were going to get past.” Sr. Anne continued, saying that “the African sisters were like generals...they were remarkable women. They had drivers who knew how to get away from dangers. Our eyes were open and...we couldn’t believe it.”

Upon recommendation from Srs. Lisa Olivieri and Sr. Kathleen Burns, a one-month Basic Technology Workshop was held at Chestnut Hill College and Marywood University in the Summer of 2006. Five African sisters attended this workshop to prepare them to supervise and instruct other sisters at the ASEC computer labs in their countries. The sisters were hosted by the Sisters of St. Joseph at Chestnut Hill College, which proved to be a great experience for the United States sisters and African sisters as well. Experiences such as these, empowered the African sisters to have greater involvement and responsibility in ASEC and also engaged additional American sisters in the collaboration.

### **THE PATH FOR THE FUTURE - SLDI**

Several organizational milestones occurred in 2005-2006 that secured the foundation of ASEC—Sr. Kathryn was appointed as the ASEC United States project coordinator, bylaws were developed, and a Board of Directors was established. The Founding Mothers all echoed that “people power” during this time was a challenge. Though the congregational leaders, college/university presidents, and the staff who reported to them were very generous with their time, they did have other job commitments and could not manage all of the day to day operational tasks that needed to be done. ASEC was meeting regularly but things seemed to be moving very slowly. Sr. Carol Jean recalled that at one particular meeting it felt like we were “floundering” and “treading water,” “we wanted to throw up our hands and scream.” It was decided that the time had come to hire a full time executive director. Sr. Anne was appointed as the first ASEC Executive Director in March of 2006. ASEC’s office was established at Marywood University. A primary focus of



Sr. Anne during the first several months as executive director was completing the documents for incorporation as a 501(C)3 organization. She remembers being greatly assisted in that task by Sr. Anita. In June of 2006, the first annual ASEC meeting was held and the ASEC Board of Directors formally began working. The ASEC Board of Directors originally consisted of representatives from each of ASEC's Corporate Institutions, as well as other nominees vital to ASEC's success including representatives from African national conferences/associations.

Funding of ASEC had been a priority from the beginning. Seed money, planning grants, corporate institution contributions, and donations of computers all helped to keep ASEC running. However, program funding was a necessity, if access to education for the sisters was going to be a reality. Sr. Marcia began discussing a funding possibility with ASEC members. Sr. Marcia recalls talking with Steve Hilton, the CEO of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation at the time, about a vision he had of providing leadership training to sisters in developing countries. He called it "the Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI)" and was having difficulty getting it started in Asia but was interested in establishing it in other regions. Sr. Marcia had told Steve about ASEC and its mission. The Founding Mothers had been focused on facilitating access to higher education via distance learning. Though SLDI was concerned with leadership development and competency building, similar to ASEC's goals, it was focused on skill building and training, not attainment of higher education degrees. After much discussion, the ASEC Board of Directors agreed to explore the possibility of becoming the lead agency for the implementation of SLDI in Africa.

A critical event occurred in October of 2006, Steve Hilton was to be in New York City on business and arranged to meet with Srs. Marcia, Mary, Carol Jean, Anne, and Kathryn to discuss their hopes and dreams for ASEC. During the meeting, Steve told the ASEC Founding Mothers that if they agreed to develop SLDI, he would consider future funding of higher education opportunities for sisters in Africa, the primary goal of ASEC. After sharing their ideas and visions, ASEC decided to accept the invitation to write a grant proposal for the development of the SLDI program. Sr. Marcia and Sr. Anne worked together, with the assistance of Brad Myers of the Hilton Foundation, to develop the proposal.

In February of 2007, ASEC was awarded a three-year \$2 million grant to implement the SLDI program. Sr. Anne recalls being in the airport when she heard the news that the grant was awarded, "I cried, I couldn't stop the tears. I had such a sense that this is of God and it had to do with all of us

together." Sr. Kathryn was at a meeting at Marywood University when she heard about the award and she recalls, "we were just all jumping for joy." The SLDI grant award in 2007 was the launching of what would become five additional grant awards for the program over the next 18 years, as well as the training and capacity building of over 6,000 individuals across the continent of Africa.

Sr. Marcia used a train analogy when she was describing the complementary visions of ASEC and Steve Hilton's SLDI. She said, "ASEC was on track and the perfect vehicle to realize the vision of providing the African sisters with education, SLDI was the engine that moved it forward with an emphasis on magnifying the effectiveness of their ministries."

SLDI provided an opportunity for African sisters to develop technology, leadership, and administrative skills, along with expected mentoring activities to expand the reach of the program beyond direct participants. ASEC's original goal to provide access to higher education via distance learning was finally realized as a pilot project funded by the Hilton Foundation in 2013. This pilot project would ultimately become ASEC's Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA) program, growing to serve more than 2,000 sisters over the next 10 years. Both SLDI and HESA remain in operation today, continuing to serve the women religious of Africa and strengthening their capacity to provide services that address local and global challenges.

## Conrad N. Hilton Foundation & Catholic Sisters Initiative History

Steve Hilton is the grandson of Conrad N. Hilton, a man who had many positive childhood experiences with the Sisters of Loretto in New Mexico. As a result of his deep connection to Catholic sisters, Conrad N. Hilton's personal philanthropy focused on supporting sisters and their ministries. Upon his passing, Conrad N. Hilton provided his most significant gift to the sisters, when he stated in his will "give aid to...the sisters, who devote their love and life's work for the good of mankind, for they appeal especially to me as deserving help from the Foundation." Thus established the Hilton Foundation's Catholic Sisters Initiative, a Hilton Foundation program area that focuses on continuing his legacy by financially assisting Catholic sisters worldwide.



# Founding Mothers' EXPERIENCES



## DREAMS & MOTIVATION

Interspersed throughout telling the story of the development of ASEC, the Founding Mothers commented on their dream and motivations for sustaining this dream despite challenges. They felt it was a way to pay forward the energy, commitment, and dreams of their own Founding Mothers, those of their congregations and colleges/universities, by sharing the commitment of education with other sisters—the religious women of Africa. The Founding Mothers reported that ASEC developed from a desire to help educate African sisters, a few at a time in the United States, to understanding that a partnership in Africa with the sisters was crucial.

Sr. Mary explained that the Catholic Church was growing in Africa and this idea/dream was a continuation of a commitment by the colleges/universities to educate African sisters. It was very difficult for congregations in the United States to say “no,” when African sisters would write and ask them to sponsor their sisters’ education, because their needs were so great. Sr. Mary said, “we just couldn’t respond at the level that was needed. We had to think of some new strategies. We weren’t sure what we could do. We just knew we wanted to do it and that we thought, if we sat together and worked on it, we would come up with some ways in which to do it.” When the time came to formally establish ASEC, Sr. Mary indicated that, “we felt that the vision for it was just right.”

Sr. Carol Jean, as well as some of the other Founding Mothers, commented that, “we wanted to educate women religious in Africa, so that they could do for the children of Africa what women religious did in the US in the 20th century. We expanded to other areas, not just education, but that’s really what we wanted to do in the beginning. We knew it would change society the same way it did here.” She

went on to quote Victor Hugo, “there’s nothing so powerful as an idea whose time has come.” Sr. Carol Jean made statements to describe ASEC’s founding as divine intervention, such as, “it was the time,” “it was the moment and therefore it happened,” and “God’s power working in and through us was amazing.”

Sr. Anne remembered, when she came back from an early trip to Africa, that she thought that “if we didn’t at some point figure out a way to work with the African sisters to provide education for their members, African sisters would never have the potential that we had through the Sisters’ Formation Movement in the United States to establish schools and healthcare systems.” She continued, “there was a persistent, passionate belief that this was something of God and that it wasn’t ours to contain.”

Sr. Marie echoed the thoughts shared by the other Founding Mothers. She said, “We really believed in the purpose of this project, that it was very important that the African sisters receive technical assistance so that they in turn would be able to educate their own members in their countries.” Sr. Marie also added, “the project you know unfolded, it evolved, it grew, it expanded...this was the hope in the beginning. I don’t think we had any clear idea of how far this would spread but we had hope and were willing to put energy and resources into fulfilling that hope.”

Sr. Kathryn spoke about the deep commitment they had for providing education for the sisters in Africa, and said, “you could not, not want to help them. Their gratitude and desire to be a part of this was inspiring.”

Sr. Marcia talked about the complementary visions of ASEC and Steve Hilton’s SLDI. She explained, “I think his vision filled out the dream of what ASEC was.”



## FOUNDING VALUES

Throughout the interviews, the Founding Mothers described several intertwined values that were embedded in the development of ASEC. The founding values outlined by the Founding Mothers continue to be reflected in ASEC's work today, exemplified in the organization's current core values of collaboration, leadership, service, capacity building, and reverence.

Collaboration and building of a global sisterhood was a prominent theme in all of the interviews and sometimes expressed as "partnership" or "mutuality." Sr. Anne remarked that even in the beginning, the program was successful "because the hopes and dreams for education were already there for the sisters. It was what they wanted." The African sisters just needed the religious sisters in the United States to partner with them and help them grow and develop. Sr. Anne noted that ASEC was successful because "it started from scratch." The intent was to do this together, a collaboration between the United States and African sisters, and especially the African sisters' national conferences/associations in each country. Sr. Marie said, "we wanted to take the risk in collaboration with other sisters, other religious congregations, to invest in this project. It was hoped that this project would take root, that it would expand and grow." Sr. Mary also reflected, what the others implied, "it wasn't just about the six women who sat around the table....it became the work of so many, especially the African sisters. We couldn't have done it without them."

The core belief in transformation, through educational capacity building of sisters, was also present in the Founding Mothers' descriptions of ASEC's establishment. Education was the Founding Mothers' common mission. From the beginning, the Founding Mothers understood the importance of education in building the African sisters' leadership capacity. They knew that if given the right tools (i.e., education and training), the sisters in Africa would be better able to serve in their ministries, and that effective ministries would result in positive societal changes throughout the continent of Africa. Sr. Marcia's work with the Hilton Fund for Sisters had led her to discuss her African experience with the group sharing, "the African sisters were so responsive to any funds or training they received and they kind of multiplied it."

The passionate belief that this vision/dream was deeply rooted in God, supported a commitment to ASEC even in the midst of challenges and uncertainty about the future. The Founding Mothers engaged in reverence and were committed to service, they commented that they felt that it was their responsibility as women religious to respond to

this need of the African sisters. A common thread was the idea that they felt they were passing on the opportunities that the Founding Mothers of their own colleges/universities and congregations had given to them and wanted to pass it on to their African sisters, that this was the right thing to do.

## FINDING MEANING

As the Founding Mothers recounted the development of ASEC, they used a myriad of common words and phrases to describe what their experience meant to them. They all commented they were honored to be able to participate in something that was so important and that their African sisters were willing to accept that they wanted to work with them and collaborate with them. They were all also grateful that they were able to do what they hoped and dreamed they could do for their African sisters. Sr. Carol Jean said it was overwhelming, "you never think you'll be involved in something like that." In addition, some said it is exhilarating, inspirational, and amazing to see what has been accomplished over the last 25 years. They found the spirituality of the African sisters and their zeal for religious life and the Church to be humbling, it was "very of the gospel," they were "being called to do this," and it was "a response to the prophetic responsibility of women religious."

## HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

As the Founding Mothers talked about their hopes for the future of ASEC, the most prevalent comments focused on developing strategies to continue to garner support for the project. "We'd like to get the story out there more, to get more support for the project. It may be many years until they don't need us anymore." They feel that ASEC's story needs to be told because there is the possibility that the amazing work that has been done here can be replicated in other places. Additionally, other colleges/universities and institutes of women religious can join ASEC's cause, furthering the impact of the organization and allowing more sisters to access education. Sr. Carol Jean stated, "the story is nowhere finished...changing these women's lives, giving them the tools they need, will transform the future for both women and men in Africa."



2006 Site Visit to Tanzania



# CONCLUSION

Twenty-five years later, the dreams of ASEC's Founding Mothers are now a reality. With more than 10,000 individuals directly served through ASEC programming and over 2.4 million people benefitting from the efforts of its alumni, ASEC is a thriving organization that continues to adapt to meet the educational needs of Catholic sisters in Africa. Today, ASEC is able to provide African sisters educational opportunities from the secondary to doctoral levels, as well as facilitate training in vital areas of professional development, across ten countries in Africa. ASEC "has endured and will until its mission is accomplished." Sr. Mary believes that, "this is an example of the continuation of the response of women religious to the needs of their time. Because it's there to be done, you make it work...when it is of the spirit, when it is of God, I think it works...and it turns out to be an ASEC."

ASEC is a brilliant example of what can grow from several seeds and strong roots. As Sr. Anne said, "all we had in the beginning were some seeds...seeds of commitment and...belief." ASEC is now a strong, flourishing organization because of small seeds that were sown back in 1995 and has grown to achieve the vision of the Founding Mothers for ASEC, "being deeply rooted in God, being deeply rooted in mission, the mission of Jesus, which is, everyone has a place and nobody is excluded from the table."



*Clockwise from Top Left: Children at Site Visit to Tanzania, 2004 ASEC Conference, Bigwa Secondary School Students in Tanzania*







# Special Acknowledgements

As outlined by the Founding Mothers, the establishment of ASEC was a truly collaborative process. There were many individuals, in addition to the Founding Mothers, that provided vital contributions in ASEC's early days (1999-2007). A listing is included below acknowledging the tireless efforts of these individuals. Please note that the listing below is not exhaustive. ASEC recognizes that there are many more contributors, not all of which are listed here. To all those who have assisted ASEC in growing into the organization it is today, ASEC sincerely thanks you for your tenacity and service!

## Special Thanks

- Ann R. Henry
- Brad Myers
- Brigid Blake
- Cheryl Simpson-Whitaker
- Diane Keller
- Frances Griffith
- Grace Lines
- Irv Rothman
- Lois Draina
- Lorraine Aurely
- Margaret Healy
- Mary Leahy
- Sr. Annmarie Sanders, IHM
- Sr. Anne Myers, SSJ
- Sr. Beatrice Jefferies, SBS
- Sr. Esther Anderson, OSF
- Sr. Francine Fasolka, IHM
- Sr. Gail Cabral, IHM
- Sr. Jacquelyn Ernster, OSB
- Sr. Kathleen M. Burns, IHM
- Sr. Lisa Oliveri, SSJ
- Sr. Louise Mayock, SND
- Sr. Margaret Gannon, IHM
- Sr. Rose Reda, SSJ
- Steve Hilton

## ASEC's 2006 Technology Training Attendees

- Sr. Agnes Dondo, GGS, Tanzania
- Sr. Clementina Obembe, OSF, Nigeria
- Sr. Eva Ngina Mutua, CPS, Kenya
- Sr. Jacinthe B. Tumwiine, OLGC, Uganda
- Sr. Regina Afla, HDR, Ghana

## ASEC's First Board of Directors (June 2006)

- Rosalie M. Mirenda, President, Neumann College
- Sharon Hirsh, President, Rosemont College
- Sr. Carol Jean Vale, SSJ, President, Chestnut Hill College
- Sr. Helen McDonald, SHCJ, Provincial, Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus
- Sr. Lynn Lavin, OSF, Congregational Minister, Sisters of St. Francis of St. Francis of Philadelphia
- Sr. Marijane Hresko, OSF, Permanent Delegate, Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia
- Sr. Mary Persico, IHM, President, Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary
- Sr. Mary Reap, IHM, President, Marywood University
- Sr. Michele Puma, SHCJ, Permanent Delegate, Rosemont College
- Sr. Patricia Kelly, SSJ, Superior General, Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia

## ASEC's 2004 Conference Attendees

- Sr. Brigid Nancy Andoh, SSL, Ghana
- Sr. Delphine Njeri, LSOSF, Uganda
- Sr. Elizabeth Amoakoh-Arhen, OLA, Ghana
- Sr. Felicia Harry, OLA, Ghana
- Sr. Immaculate Basil Mirambo, OLQA, Tanzania
- Sr. Juliana Kemi Osiyemi, EHJ, Nigeria
- Sr. Leonida Kwamboka, IBVM, Kenya
- Sr. Lucy Wanjiru Mbuthia, DSH, Kenya
- Sr. Mary Fidesta Adelaida Rimisho, CPS, Tanzania
- Sr. Mary Mukanyangezi, DST, Uganda
- Sr. Mary Pauline Eboh, DMMM, Nigeria
- Sr. Monica Abel Muziganya, Tanzania
- Sr. Teresa Namataka, SMK, Uganda
- Sr. Veronica Openibo, SHCJ, Nigeria
- Sr. Mary Paul Wamutu, CPS, Kenya



# Reference Materials





# ASEC

## Programs, Mission, Vision, & Core Values as of 2024

### Programs

#### Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI)\*

SLDI 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.

#### Institutional Capacity Building (ICB)\*

Housed under SLDI, ICB 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.

#### Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA)\*

HESA 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.

#### The Scholarship Program

The Scholarship Program bridges the gap to higher education for sisters by providing scholarships to complete secondary school or higher education credentials relevant to their ministries. Many of our scholarship recipients continue their education through the HESA program. Since 2012.

#### Service Learning

Students and sisters from ASEC corporate member 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 them to engage in research projects, and develop ASEC as a central repository of data related to women religious in Africa. Since 2010.

*\*Made possible by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation.*



## Mission

The African Sisters Education Collaborative educates Catholic women religious in Africa to strengthen their leadership capacity to provide services that address local and global challenges.

## Core Values

### Transformation

The educational and professional development opportunities ASEC provides for Catholic women religious in Africa are designed to help them achieve their full human potential and become more influential in addressing local and global challenges, especially for those most in need.

### Collaboration

ASEC nurtures multi-layered partnerships that further its mission in accordance with the gospel call to unity and solidarity. Recognizing the shared goal of furthering educational opportunities for women religious in Africa, ASEC works together with partners in the spirit of global sisterhood to support the personal and spiritual growth of sisters in Africa and their collaborative approach to addressing the challenges of their ministries.

### Leadership

ASEC enhances the leadership capacity of women religious in Africa to leverage their strengths and those of their sisters, staff, students, and others they influence, to achieve common goals.

## Vision

ASEC is an organization with a proven capacity to strengthen, through education and empowerment, the unique potential of Catholic women religious in Africa to fulfill Christ's mission, effectively promoting human development, spiritual growth, and transformation of the lives of the people they joyfully serve in accordance with the charisms of their institutes and the needs of their ministries.

### Service

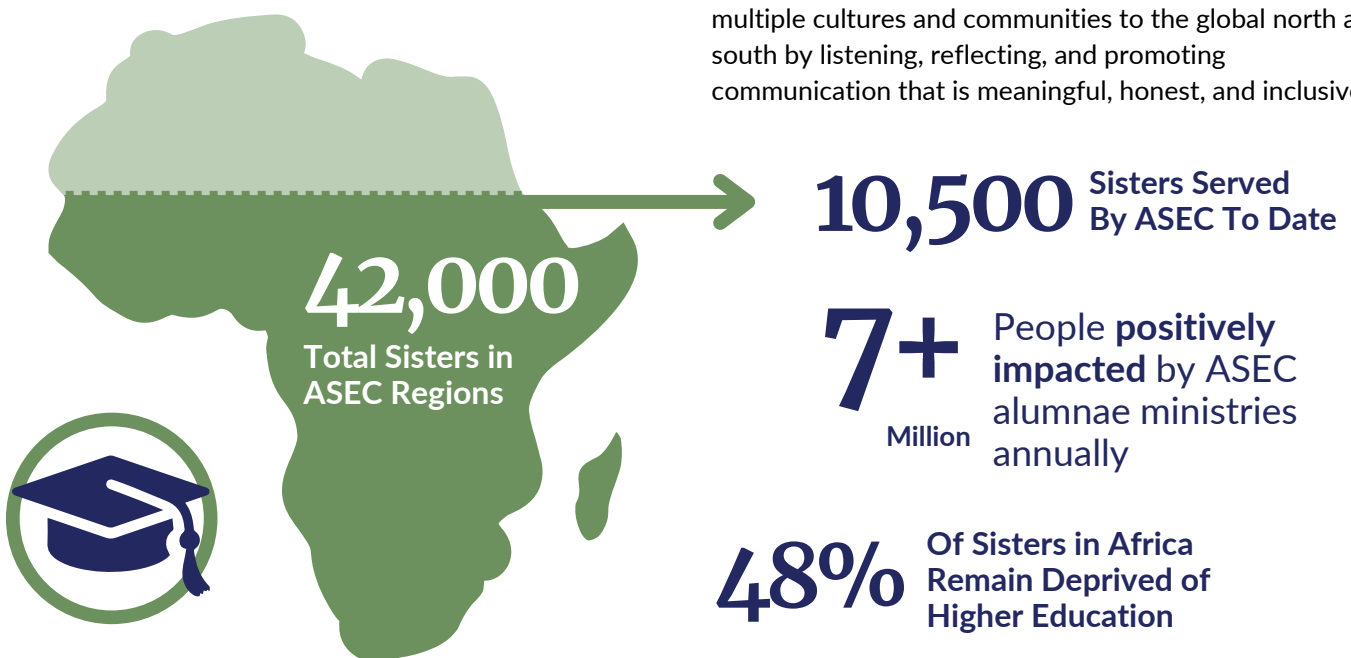
ASEC cultivates an environment of service among all its stakeholders by promoting social responsibility and community engagement to meet the needs of society. ASEC recognizes that women religious in Africa devote their lives to service in a spirit of compassion, humility, love, and protection for all of God's creation.

### Capacity Building

ASEC is committed to strengthening skills, competencies, and academic and professional credentials of women religious in Africa, by enhancing the capacity of experts through training to increase their ability to build sustainable programs and organizations that address the social, human, and spiritual needs of their societies.

### Reverence

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

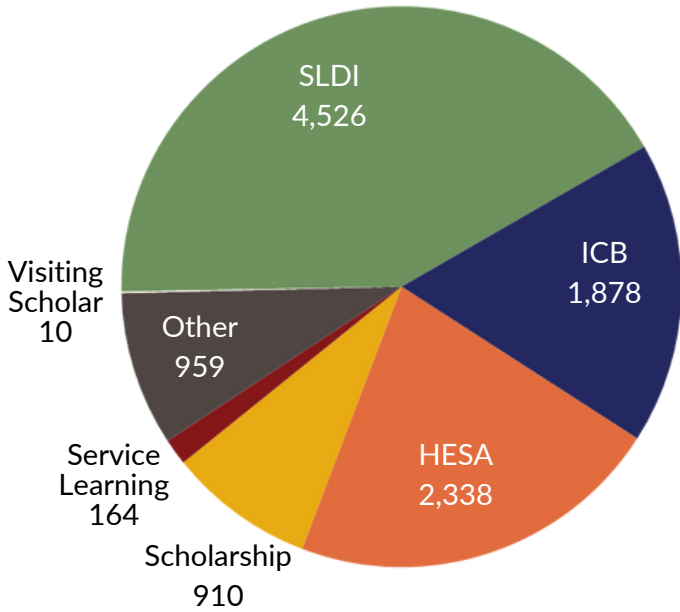




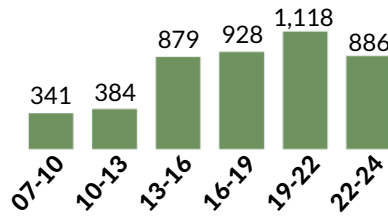
# African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC)

## Impact After 25 Years of Service (April 2024)

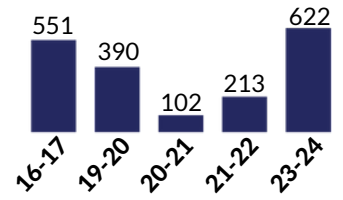
Since 2004, ASEC has served individuals **10,785** times through all programming.



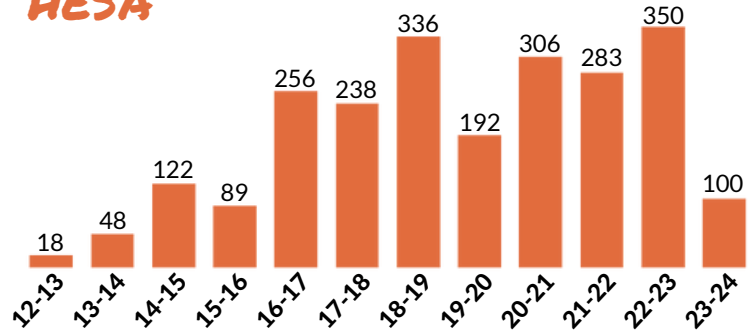
### SLDI



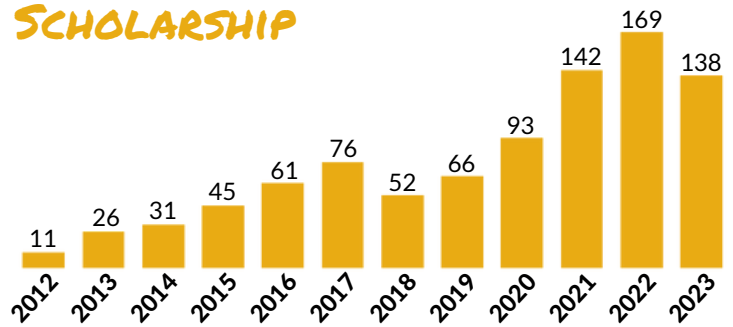
### ICB



### HESA



### SCHOLARSHIP



## ASEC ALUMNAE IMPACT



Alumnae serve **7 million+** beneficiaries annually, mostly in rural areas



**75%** of alumnae ministries contribute to at least one SDG

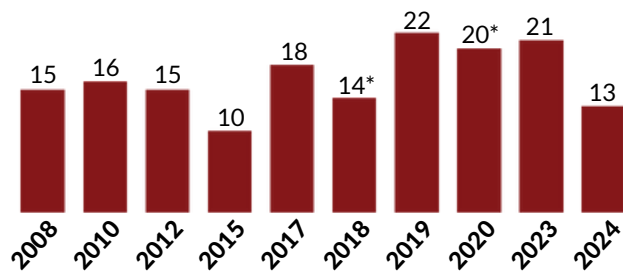


**97%** of alumnae beneficiaries report that sisters have **improved their quality of life**



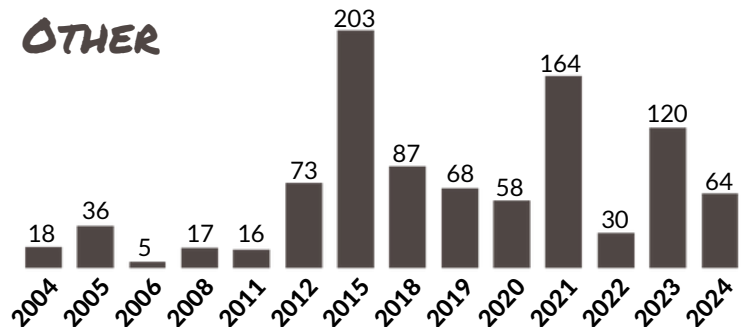
**98%** of alumnae beneficiaries feel ASEC programs are **preparing sisters to better serve their community**

### SERVICE LEARNING



\*Trips in 2018 & 2020 were cancelled due to safety concerns.

### OTHER



\*Includes ASEC Historical Conferences/Workshops, Partner Conferences/Trainings, Research Conferences & Webinars, etc.



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***[asec-sldi.org](http://asec-sldi.org)***

