

Catholic Sisters Conference

Service, Advocacy and Change: Reverend Sister and Nation Building

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ADVOCACY

MISSION STATEMENT

The Africa Faith and Justice Network, inspired by the Gospel and informed by Catholic Social Teaching, seeks to educate and advocate for just relations with Africa and to work in partnership with African peoples as they engage in the struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Moved to action by their personal experiences in Africa, three Catholic missionary congregations namely the Missionaries of Africa, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritains), and the Society of African Missions, founded the Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN) in 1983 to transform United States policy towards Africa and her people. Since that time, membership has grown and remains committed in faith to advocate in Washington, DC for U.S. relations with Africa that foster justice and peace, and to educate the public across the United States on the truth about Africa.

Welcome Address by

Rev. Aniedi Okure, OP, AFJN Executive Director

Greetings

Dear Sisters, Your Excellencies, distinguished guests; I bring you greetings from the staff, Board of Directors, Organizational Members, and Individual Members of the Africa Faith & Justice Network (AFJN) in Washington DC.

Birth of AFJN

AFJN is the brainchild of returned missionaries who had served in Africa or have members serving in Africa. Some had lived in Africa for ten, fifteen, twenty years or more. Upon their return to their home country, they observed something systemic that made them very uncomfortable - indeed they were unsettled by what they saw as injustice. The first was the pervasive negative images of Africa in the media - images of starving children, conflict situations, poverty conditions, and so on. The second is was the realization that in US-Africa policy relations, Africa was always getting the very short end of the stick.

So they discussed among themselves and said, "We have to do something." That something was the foundation of AFJN to advocate on behalf of Africa before US law makers, secondly to educate the American public about the real Africa they lived in and knew as opposed to the Africa of the movies and media, tell them the truth, about the wonderful people they interacted with; and thirdly to work with African communities in their struggle for self empowerment so they can be their own advocates for justice, uphold their God endowed dignity, work collaboratively for the common good, and hold their leaders accountable.

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ing, seeks to educate and advocate for just relations with Africa and to work in partnership with African peoples as they engage in the struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

AFJN Empowerment Projects in Africa

In the last four years, AFJN has focused its activities in Africa more than ever. We realized that we have a great army – millions of advocates who understand the challenges facing them since they experience these difficulties on a daily basis. However, we also realize that many feel helpless in the face of these structural injustices and assume it is too much for them, that they cannot do anything about it. But nothing can be so far from the truth. The solutions to these problems lie within the community itself. You are the solution to these problems.

One thing most Africans do not realize is that their leaders are their employees and therefore accountable to them. So whenever their leaders do a tiny bit of what they are supposed to do, they feel their leaders are doing a favor to the community. We thank God that we have one person in our midst today who understands that leadership is for service, one who understands that leaders are stewards of the peoples' resources.

See Something; Do Something

Thirty-three years ago, a small group of returned missionaries gathered in Washington, DC, because they saw injustice and they said, "We have to do something." They did. And they are still doing something through AFJN programs and advocacy today. A lot has been accomplished in Washington and throughout Africa. Interestingly, all these have been achieved on a shoe string budget, with little money. As you know men and women religious are not people with bags full of money. Yet these communities and individuals contribute from their meager resources to fund AFJN, to promote justice, human dignity and the common good.

Let me bring up one sister here because of her relationship to Nigeria. A New York based Holy Child Sister Margaret Rogers, in her eighties, who taught at Cornelia Connelly College in Uyo, Akwa Ibom many years ago, regularly sends in \$50; \$100 from her pocket money to support the ministry of AFJN. Also, a Ghanaian Handmaid Sister in Houston sends in \$200 every year from her pocket money. There are many like that. And to our pleasant surprise early this year, a Ghanaian lady who is well pleased with the accomplishments of AFJN in Ghana, sent in \$100 from Ghana to Washington to support AFJN. These widows might continue keep AFJN alive.

Money Not Always Needed for Justice Ministry

Without blowing our horn, AFJN has accomplished great things with little or no money. So you do not always need bags of money to achieve justice and what is right. Most great human achievements have come through sheer determination; people standing together for the truth shoulder-to-shoulder to seek justice, to be the voice of the voiceless and to do what is right.

Dear sisters, you who are gathered here today far outnumber the original small group that gathered in Washington to tackle the injustice they saw. You have an advantage that they did not. You are well connected to the grassroots in ways they were not, you have many people that you have taught, treated in the medical field, counseled or touched their lives in so many ways. You have numerous relatives and supporters. You have many people young and old waiting and eager for leadership to change the unjust structures that robs them of their dignity and their rights as God's children and citizens of this country.

A Divine Mandate to Act on Behalf of Justice

So the ball is in your court. AFJN serves as a facilitator. That means you have to decide what happens now and after this gathering. That means, when you see something you do something. That means you; sisters have to take ownership of this divine mission of advocacy and changing the structures of injustice. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, our Advocate to accompany us in our mission. You have received that same spirit to empower you to be advocates.

Prior to this promise, Jesus himself indicated as recorded in Luke 4:18 that justice ministry and changing the structures of oppression and dehumanization was an integral part of his mission of salvation: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom to captives, liberty to the oppressed and set the prisoners free."

Dear sisters, you have been given the ability to do all these things and more. There are many who have eyes but cannot see. Millions held captive by unjust structures, prisoners of helplessness and a "let them help us" or "we cannot do it" mentality waiting to be set free. Vulnerable people trafficked as disposable goods, and greedy money addicts willing to sell poison to people to get rich.

Working to change attitudes can sometimes be a slow and tedious process. So you might not see the result right away. As teachers, you do not expect your student to graduate overnight. It is a sustained process of engagement.

Sometimes, people might feel comfortable in their misery, thinking the alternative is too difficult to achieve, or that it greater than what they can do, so they settle for slavery rather that work for freedom. But remember that every great thing started with little beginnings. No pain, no gain.

Sisters As Agents of Change

The Church has specifically called on you to be agents of change, agents of transformation, and agents of liberation; to nurture laboratories of justice and human rights. And you have the church community behind you in this venture. Recall that you Sisters have played and continue to play significant roles in the socio-political transformation of the Nigerian society; you have been agents of capacity and

nation building through formal and informal education, through development projects such as women's self-help programs and through diverse forms of social services across Nigeria and Africa. Through these services, you have enabled many Nigerians to enter the main stream of social, academic, economic and political life. We are calling on you to channel some of these energies beyond service provision into changing the structures that keep Nigerians in poverty and prevent them from realizing their full potential as God's children.

So you have the foundation to stand on for these engagements beyond service provision orientation, to changing the dehumanizing ills in the society. Given your track record, the Africa Faith & Justice Network has found in you a fertile ground for coalition building, information sharing, and mobilization for achieving greater impact in changing attitudes and in promoting the common good of the society. Most especially, we believe that your coalition and active participation in the public sphere will serve as a formidable force in addressing the current socio-economic and political ills that beset Nigeria and the rest of Africa - corruption, lack of rule of law, lack of transparency, and failure to work for the common good.

The Church Community Behind You

Pope Benedict XVI in the Post Synodal Exhortation *Africae Munus* (Africa's Commitment) launched on November 19, 2011, in the Republic of Benin, observed that the lack of justice is distorting Africa's social order. He called for mobilizing the voices and talents of women in the humanization of African society (#57). He also urged that the promotion of justice must be an integral part of charity work because a charity that is not accompanied by justice is false.

In 2013, African Catholic Bishops - the Symposium of Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) - identified poor governance as the greatest ill of African society. You all know that a major aspect of poor governance is corruption which the bishops (SECAM) describe in that pastoral letter as "a cancer that stands in the way of Africa's development."

So dear sisters, the ministry of justice is rooted in the Scripture; it is inspired by Catholic Social Teaching, it is urged by our Popes, and African Bishops call out that all hands must be on deck in the service of justice ministry.

I know you can do it in great style. The lessons of history testify to the fact that when women, and women religious in a special way set out to work for change, to advance the cause of justice, to serve the common good, they do just that, and do so with great and resounding impact, they bring alive the African proverb: "When ants unite their mouths, they can carry an elephant." So I am all ears and eyes for your impact, for you to tackle the giant elephant in Nigeria's society.

May the Holy Spirit inspire you, and may Our Mother Mary accompany you.
Peace