

Evangelos Thiani

African Orthodox Philanthropic Diakonia Before and During COVID-19 in Kenya



1. Introduction: Philanthropic diakonia amidst suffering and evil

Contemporary studies have identified the Orthodox Church worldwide as less serious in formulating professional centralised administrative structures that set and manage their missional and pastoral institutions of philanthropic diakonia.¹ Considering philanthropy is a basic internal part of the church,² most Orthodox churches run such a vital aspect of God's mission and the church's mission with no method, system or professionalism. The standard practice is where there is need, the church offers help to their faithful, or one Orthodox jurisdiction shares diakonia resources with another needful Orthodox jurisdiction. This is how most African philanthropic institutions receive resources from Orthodox jurisdictions in Europe, America and Australia. However, not having formidable existing philanthropic diakonia institutions and experts of diakonia and pastoral care work makes many resources that would have been fundamental in mission to be lost, misused or sometimes not to be gathered. Simultaneously, the lack of such professional institutions with existing systems has impeded the creation of sustainable and long-term philanthropic diakonia projects.

Recently, the Great Council held in Crete on the Pentecost of 2016 taught that Christians are co-workers with Christ (1 Cor 3:9) and emphasised the need for philanthropic diakonia within the pastoral life of the church.

In fulfilling her salvific mission in the world, the Orthodox Church actively cares for all people in need, including the hungry, the poor, the sick,

¹ Molokotos-Liederman 2009, 13

² Dietrich and Thiani 2021.

the disabled, the elderly, the persecuted, those in captivity and prison, the homeless, the orphans, the victims of destruction and military conflict, those affected by human trafficking and modern forms of slavery. The Orthodox Church's efforts to confront destitution and social injustice are an expression of her faith and the service to the Lord, who identifies Himself with every person and especially with those in need: Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me (Mt 25:40). This multidimensional social service enables the Church to cooperate with various relevant social institutions.³

The sacrificial love of God for His creation is for the Orthodox Church extended to missional contexts through aiding others through philanthropic diakonia and is not only in following Christ's footsteps but also as a duty for all Orthodox Christians and, by extension, the church universal. Neither the church nor its followers can therefore consider themselves Christian if they do not participate in philanthropic diakonia.

Just like Christ was there for humanity when no one else was there to assist humanity, so should His bride, the Church, be there for those in need, continuing to extend this philanthropic, humanitarian love of God to the world. Human suffering is real and impossible to escape while in this world, as Christ noted in Matt 26:11, this world shall always have materially poor people. Therefore, it is imperative to put what Clapsis says in mind that "[s]uffering is an inescapable aspect of human life in the present world. Suffering, affliction and tragic experiences disclose the vulnerable nature of human life; it enables us to recognise our limitations as human beings and our dependence upon others and upon God for sustenance in life."⁴ It is the responsibility of the church of Christ to give hope and solutions to the problems of humanity.

Whether within a social development institution or a faith-based philanthropic diakonia institution such as the church, the act of helping the poor and suffering in society is always in three stages. Moving from one stage to the other shows the effectiveness of the development initiative and/or project. This is better explained by the definitions given by Corbett and Fikkert. For these writers, relief is the first stage, which is "the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis." The second one is the rehabilitation stage that "begins as soon as the bleeding stops; it seeks to restore people and their communities

³ Holy and Great Council 2016.

⁴ Clapsis 2015.

to the positive elements of their precision conditions." Finally, we have the development stage, which is "a process of ongoing change that moves all the people involved... closer to being in right relationship with God, self, others and the rest of creation."⁵

Relief aid, which is direly needed during crisis, is never sustainable nor does it offer much hope for tomorrow, except fulfil the need of the present day, if not hour. Such a reality does not discourage assisting during crisis, but rather demands that the church be more organised in its sustainable and continuous philanthropic diakonia. Doing so helps shorten the relief periods and create space for the rehabilitation period; there are existing structures in place that can be improved and used to sustain the suffering, moving them to the development stage. Considering an Orthodox Church such as the African Orthodox Church of Kenya (AOCK) and how they managed their social development initiatives before and during COVID-19 will highlight how relief, rehabilitation and development stages of helping the suffering and poor were managed, achieved or neglected during global crisis.

2. Study focus

COVID-19 was first announced in Nairobi on 12 March 2020, four months after the first case was announced in China in December 2019.⁶ Like in other places, this brought many societal challenges, including deaths, hospitalisation of many, losses of jobs and livelihoods and psychosocial challenges. These events that came with the COVID-19 pandemic left the poor and middle class extremely vulnerable. How the Orthodox Church in Kenya handled its philanthropic diakonia during such a crisis is important in assessing the current status of its philanthropic diakonia and its systems of doing the same. The AOCK houses four dioceses from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa. This church is obligated by its theology and practice to have ongoing philanthropic diakonia activities, whether in normal times or during a crisis.⁷

During the COVID-19 period, the AOCK, through its National Council of Churches of Kenya membership, has been part of the team guiding the

⁵ Corbett and Fikkert 2009, 104.

⁶ Ministry of Health 2020.

⁷ Dietrich and Thiani 2021.

religious institutions in Kenya on what COVID-19 is, its preventive measures and what must be done before, during and after religious or public gatherings. The joint *Inter-Faith Council on the National Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic*⁸ team, which handles all these, created a phased reopening of public worship, starting with phase one on 14 July 2020 and the second phase from 2 October 2020 onwards, although things are changing with the third wave of corona happening since February 2021. This increased attendants for Sunday services, burials and weddings from only fifteen people to the current open numbers provided the bare minimum requirements were fulfilled. This includes, among other measures, maintaining social distancing, continuous fumigation of the gathering areas before meetings, wearing of masks, hand sanitisation or washing with water and soap, no sharing of things and no eating in public gatherings.

This initiative remains the greatest philanthropic diakonia the Kenyan faith community was involved in during the COVID-19 period. This same initiative has also helped make sure the politicians are not controlling how the faith community, including the church, does their activities and shows the importance of the church remaining open during the dire period of the pandemic. Fortunately, like the rest of Africa, religious leaders in Kenya remain among the most trusted and relied upon leaders. Therefore, where they fully understand and take COVID-19 measures seriously, their adherents also follow suit, avoiding the loss of life and further spread of infection.⁹ The government, having recognised this, is highly relying on the faith community to teach COVID-19 preventative measures and lead citizens in adhering to the set government regulations and the ministry of health directives.

Due to the poverty levels of most of the areas where the parishes are located and the fact that most first-generation Orthodox Christians were engulfed in poverty, the AOCK has been involved in many philanthropic diakonia activities among Kenyans of the Orthodox faith and beyond. The first Orthodox Christians being under the *Mau Mau* liberation movement meant that their children did not attend very good schools and thus had little progress in life, most families losing their breadwinners and the energetic young men who could earn a living, either in the liberation war and or under inhumane treatment after being captured as prisoners of war by the British soldiers, while others lost most of the properties they owned before the war – living them

⁸ Kenya Gazette 2020.

⁹ Howard 2020; Ferrett, 2005; Sanny and Asiamah 2020.

extremely poor.¹⁰ Generally, the church at this juncture was associated with civilisation “progress, with education and with prestige”, thus, those within the church had to assist their poor counterparts to achieve some of that.¹¹

During and after the independence of Kenya in 1963, the AOCK members had to help out the extremely affected families of the liberation soldiers by offering them food continuously, assisting their children to study through the AOCK schools’ benevolence¹² and, in some cases, some Christians offered those who lost their lands during the land demarcation a place to settle with their families using the *ahoi* and *ubuntu* principle¹³ as they settled back in society. Beyond this 1930–1963 liberation period, the AOCK has also been involved in other philanthropic diakonia efforts in dire periods of the Kenyan nation, including during the 2002 ethnic clashes, the 2007/2008 post-election violence, the almost biannual seasonal hunger seasons and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, among others.

This study unveils how the prior organised and more localised sustainable philanthropic diakonia of the AOCK has helped create the space for the COVID-19 philanthropic diakonia efforts of this church in East Africa. It further proves the need to create and form organised long-term philanthropic diakonia institutions that research and create opportunities for the less fortunate using their ideas and those of the church to uplift their lives so that they can manage, even with very limited help, in cases of pandemics or other major life turbulences. If suffering and evil – including those challenges caused by poverty, pandemics such as COVID-19, diseases such as HIV/AIDS, war and conflicts, among others – will continue appearing in this life, then the church needs a better plan to combat them and socially assist and alleviate human suffering, while deliberately setting up sustainable forms of philanthropic diakonia before such happenings. A church that neglects that will manage very little in holistic pastoral care and mission, which demands not just the spiritual but also the material, economic, social, moral, emotional, political, physical and social care of the faithful. How a church manages its relief, rehabilitation and development initiatives makes them increasingly effective in its social development and philanthropic diakonia, more so during a global crisis.

¹⁰ Elkins 2005; Alam 2007.

¹¹ Bewes 1953, 46.

¹² Natsoulas 1998; 1988.

¹³ Thiani 2019, 304–305.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study is a descriptive-interpretive research oriented to understand the contribution of the AOCK philanthropic diakonia in handling the COVID-19 challenges, especially hunger, unemployment and lack of financial power to manage family livelihoods and pay bills. Hence, the study collected data using qualitative interviews, which were generally open-ended, to allow for broadly responded answers. The thirty-nine interviews used for this study were conducted with thirty-one social development project leaders and senior national leaders from the four AOCK dioceses. Twenty-seven of the interviewees were male senior church and project leaders, with only four senior female leaders noted at this senior level. The interviewees' ages ranged from twenty-five to eighty-six years, with the youth (thirty-five years and below) forming 19.35% of these interviews. The ordained church leaders comprised 64.5% of the interviewees, leaving the lay leaders the remaining 35.5%. These excessive clergy numbers exposed why the older male interviewees were more and the fact that the AOCK is still highly clergy and male led in its leadership structures.

The interviews were conducted in 2013, 2019, 2020 and 2021. That is, some were conducted before COVID-19, while the remainder were conducted in conjunction with the main research question-specific interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic in the last two years, 2020 and 2021. Before COVID-19, the interviews were in-person, but this changed after the pandemic, where most of the interviews were conducted via phone. While the social institutions that this study concentrates on are spread all over Kenya, this study highly focussed on Central Kenya, particularly Nairobi and Kiambu, due to COVID-19 restrictions and since most of the target institutions and leaders are primarily located in this region. The data were analysed using the thematic analysis method.¹⁴ This analysis helped to condense the gathered data into themes that became easy to group and interpret, forming the results of this study.

¹⁴ Braun and Clarke 2013; 2006.

4. AOCK philanthropic diakonia and microfinance initiatives during COVID-19

Weeks after the first case of COVID-19 in Kenya was confirmed on 12 March 2020, the entire country was shut down, which began the suffering period of poor and middle-class Kenyans. Kenya, a developing country in East Africa, still has its largest population considered as living under USD3–5 a day, although the most basic family meal would need at least USD5 per day. Shutting down most of the activities in the country meant the loss of casual labour jobs, most companies and industries shutting down their production units and, as a consequence, letting go of many lower cadre employees. Tourism, one of the largest economic boosters in Kenya, was highly affected, with hotels, shops and tourist-related services closed down. Trade went down, and businesses lost much money, with some shutting down their places of business and releasing many of their workers. The no movement orders destabilised the movement of farm labourers, leaving some farms in very critical situations. Further, with many businesses, especially in the food industry, not operating, many farm product orders were stopped, bringing huge losses to the farm owners.

The highly expensive COVID-19-related health bills and burying the dead with no space for fundraising (*harambees*), where normally the entire community would help underprivileged families pay such bills considering such families have no health insurance, became a major challenge in Kenya. Some Kenyans sold properties and valuable items even at losses to survive, some got loans from the bank and those with no stable borrowing histories got their loans from informal moneylenders at exploitative interest rates and timelines. All these induced the inability to pay for rent, food, medical care and utility money among the poor and middle-class families, with many poor and vulnerable families becoming even poorer.

The government of Kenya tried helping the citizens by giving food and emergency cash transfers to the highly affected areas, especially in the highly populated slums and some rural villages. The civil societies were expected to offer further help, but most, having no resources to handle pandemics, were unprepared and ill-equipped. This left the church as the one grassroots social institution left to see how to help the suffering masses. Unfortunately, the countrywide lockdown included and affected the churches, even the church; the one place where suffering people could seek help was not readily avail-

lable. With restricted movements and gathering limitations, it was equally impossible for the church to get to the extremely poor. Raising funds abroad to help stabilise the lives of the poor was almost impossible because the entire world was also affected in the same ways. It was the existing localised philanthropic diakonia platforms and church institutions that seemed to have helped most of the philanthropic work of the church go smoothly, as seen in the case of the African Orthodox Church of Kenya.

4.1. Food security and farming

Before COVID-19, AOCK philanthropic diakonia initiatives were minimally involved with food security-related projects, with existing projects focusing on farming. The Orthodox Patriarchal Seminary in Riruta, Nairobi, always trains and allows their students to grow their farming talents and build the capacity to teach others. This is usually a non-compulsory school activity, and only a few students take it seriously. The committed students took small portions of land next to their dormitories and the seminary farm for their private farming. The three interviewed students confirmed that, at the beginning of their farming projects, the seminary provides them with seeds and fertilisers that they will need, and from there, they cater for the next season using the money earned from their first produce.¹⁵ “We also get water, sprinklers and other basic farming tools from the seminary, but if we need any specialised ones, then we must buy them at our own expense.”¹⁶ The student’s plots have mainly produced corn, cabbages, potatoes, tomatoes, kales and spinach. Even though it is a lucrative business, less than 10% of students are interested in such activities. During the graduation ceremony, the best students in this small-scale farming scheme are awarded a certificate and a gift card to motivate them to continue cultivating and fundament their self-reliance, creativity and entrepreneurship skills. According to the seminary leadership, “the idea behind this farming project is to impact on these future clergy and church leaders, the sense of food security and utilisation of available space and resources to combat hunger and poverty in Africa.”¹⁷

Some Orthodox parishes have also created farms that produce food for their schools or shared it with the less privileged before selling the rest for

¹⁵ Respondent 13–15, 2020.

¹⁶ Respondent 14, 2020.

¹⁷ Respondent 21, 2020.

profit. Holy Nativity Lobere-Laikipia County has been farming under the financial assistance of *Filantropia*, the Finnish Orthodox Mission arm, while Saint Nicholas parish in Elburgon, Nakuru County, has been known for locally funded wheat farming on the church farm. Other parishes that have extra space tend to have small farms but not for business purposes. The food produced in such small church farms is given to poor families or those who do the farming, if not to the priest in charge of the parish. Such initiatives, simple as they may look, have motivated parishioners to maintain kitchen farms at their homes, reducing their food budgets and adding to food security in uncertain climatic conditions.

During COVID-19, many families in Kenya needed food. The AOCK distributed food through its hierarchs and priests. This food came from campaigns done to raise funds locally in the AOCK parishes or from foreign donors. This went a long way to show the need for church institutions during the development period of the society, which is long term, and during emergencies where the church is involved in relief and rehabilitation.¹⁸ Most Kenyans having lost their jobs during the COVID-19 period, have forced the AOCK, such as all other religious and governmental bodies in Kenya, to be even more aggressive in suggesting to their members to farm their food in whatever spaces they have. Those who embraced this call early enough, including the seminarians and priests, have seen the fruits of the same, for they do not rely on the church or other aid institutions feeding them daily; rather, they can at least put some fresh food on their table and sell some. Further, others have embraced agro-businesses, where they buy farm products and sell them on the roadside, farmers' markets and/or in general assembly areas, with others doing it online.¹⁹ In areas where such families cannot raise money or food for their upkeep, the diocesan bishops are constantly raising funds from abroad to buy and distribute food to such families, while the parish priests are also gathering food every Sunday for distribution to the poor in their areas. "If not for these food distribution initiatives, some of the clergy and laity of the AOCK would have greatly suffered at this time,"²⁰ a status expected to continue until COVID-19 is fully managed, probably by the end of 2023, when most countries will have gone through the fourth phase and vaccinations.

¹⁸ Corbett and Fikkert 2009, 103-105.

¹⁹ Chepkoech 2020; Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition 2020.

²⁰ Respondent 4, 2021

4.2. Water programmes

Water is an important part of life; unfortunately, it was not accessible to all, leaving some communities in Kenya with development-related, health, sanitary and agricultural challenges, among other livelihood deficiencies. “The AOCC has drilled hundreds of water wells in various places in Kenya. Some of the wells were drilled in Orthodox parishes’ and schools’ lands to improve safety and ease of access, but also to cater for the needs of the local communities; Orthodox and non-Orthodox.”²¹ This can be seen in the hundreds of wells drilled in 1970–1980 in the current Archdiocese of Nairobi and the Diocese of Nyeri and Mount Kenya, with the over 200 water wells drilled in the current Dioceses of Kisumu and Western Kenya and of Eldoret and Northern Kenya from the 1970s till now. These later dioceses have more wells than the other two because they have semi-arid areas and challenging topographies prohibiting rivers or piped water from reaching the habitable areas. “Due to water scarcity in these areas, wells were also drilled in private, community and public/ government-owned lands, with the understanding that the water will be run by and will serve the local communities with no discrimination, in addition to the concerned communities caring for the wells.”²²

“The funding of the wells has mainly come from Orthodox churches, mission organisations and the faithful from Europe and America, with European nations, especially Finland and Greece funding most of the wells drilled from 1970 to the mid-1990s, and the Americans mainly funding the wells drilled from the late 1990s to the present times.”²³ Some wells were also drilled with the help of funds received from foreign governments through Orthodox organisations in their countries. A good example is the Finnish Orthodox missionaries who did some 30 water wells in various places in Kenya between 1985 and 1988 under a Kenyan-based Finnish water-drilling company receiving funds from the Finnish government.²⁴

Except the wells drilled in Laikipia and Nyeri counties that got one well each, all the other wells were drilled in Northern and Western Kenya where the lack of water is greater, and over 60% were drilled in non-Orthodox lands. The missionaries targeted semi-arid areas irrespective of the faith adheren-

²¹ Respondent 1, 2020.

²² Ibid.

²³ Respondent 5, 2021.

²⁴ Lounela 2007, 239–248.

ce of the communities. The America-based *Orthodox Christian Mission Centre* (OCMC) drilled five wells in Nyanza and Turkana in the new millennium, and more were added in Turkana by the *Sophia Foundation* from Cyprus.²⁵ “The wells done in our county by the church is meant to aid the Orthodox Christians of Turkana and our surrounding communities, by providing water for us and our animals, considering that our region is a highly pastoralist area.”²⁶ Water and grazing land in the Turkana region of Kenya have become a source of conflict and the reason behind many inter-ethnic wars and animal theft, which has left many poorer, maimed, psychologically and emotionally hurt and some dead, instigating unending inter-ethnic wars during or right after the dry/drought seasons in these regions.²⁷ Thus, giving water to Turkana, which, together with Marsabit, is the driest and least productive county in Kenya, has been about saving lives by feeding humans and animals and keeping peace among the communities: an initiative AOCK has taken very seriously.²⁸

Since 2019, the AOCK has consulted with two Orthodox parishes in California, USA, Saint Barbara in Santa Barbara and Saint Paul in Irvine, through a classmate of the writer Adam Mwesigwa, a Tanzanian Orthodox believer who managed the implementation of a similar project in Tanzania. The consultation has been about fundraising and buying a water drilling rig through the subsidised formula and aid of the Rotary Club in Santa Barbara and their Kenyan counterpart in Syokimau, Kajiado County. According to the initial agreements, “this rig will be owned, operated and cared for by the Orthodox Church in Kenya, but the Syokimau Rotary Club in Kenya will be able to borrow it for use in humanitarian activities, as the two-share expertise and guidance. The fundraising was originally anticipated to end by 2022 and the rig operating by 2023, but I see this plan changing with the current COVID-19 dynamics and fundraising challenges.”²⁹ This project will reduce the cost of drilling wells for the AOCK, broaden local capacity and expedite the drilling process to help those without water.

During the COVID-19 period, which demanded constant washing of hands, the AOCK offered water to the locals of the highly vulnerable areas,

²⁵ OCMC 2019.

²⁶ Respondent 29, 2020.

²⁷ Mugambe 2020.

²⁸ Pragya-Kenya 2020.

²⁹ Respondent 1, 2021.

especially in the slums and low wage areas of Kibera, Dandora, Kangemi and Kabiria, which are within Nairobi – the region with the highest COVID-19 infections in Kenya, amidst other regions in the country. “The local poor people in these areas, come with jerry cans to the church compound or where the church has set the water storage tanks or wells, and either buy the water at highly subsidised prices or get it for free. This is not only seen in the slums, but also in the remote areas.”³⁰

4.3. Orphanages and care centres

Most orphaned children in Kenya tend to be cared for by their ageing grandparents, who, in most cases, are struggling to survive. Children who lost their parents to substance abuse, accidents, cancer and HIV / AIDs are prioritised by the church due to their multiple vulnerabilities. Other children who struggle come from poor homes living with both or one of their parents. Such children need food, clothing, medical care and schooling, as for over 10 million poor children in Kenya.³¹ Originally, “the AOCK placed such children in orphanages, but as they increased, the church realised that they cannot place and care for such children in 24 hours, seven days a week enclosed orphanages. This choice was highly influenced by the AOCK financial shortages and the lack of sufficient infrastructure and experts to run the orphanages.”³² Additionally, the children’s experts insisted that orphanages were also not suitable for the upbringing and developmental growth of the children and could disconnect the children from their surviving families, who helped bring a good change in the lives of the children.³³ Hence, the AOCK adopted a better approach of assisting children in need to live “normal lives” with foster families or relatives, and thus their former orphanages were largely abolished.

Most of the over 30 child care institutions currently run by the AOCK are only listed as orphanages, but they are actually child care centres that the church uses to shelter and support children in need.³⁴ Most of these semi-orphanages are in Nairobi, Kiambu and Nakuru Counties, and only a few are in

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ KNBS 2017.

³² Respondent 5, 2019.

³³ Save the Children, UK 2016.

³⁴ Orthodox Archbishopric of Kenya (OAK) 2015: 104

other areas of the country.³⁵ While most of these centres are run within church compounds, some are run in church schools and private and public land compounds. Archbishop Makarios Orphanage in Nyeri County is one AOCK traditional orphanage that still operates traditionally, catering for children with no foster families or relatives, although some of the children are also given out for adoption and fostering to committed and vetted local families.³⁶ The orphanage receives funding from foreign and local well-wishers to offer their daily care and cover their medical and educational expenses, with the *Sophia Foundation* from Cyprus contributing a major part of its funding.

The initial government COVID-19 directives included the closure of such institutions as the care centres and schools, and thus the AOCK closed their care centres down, leaving only the active orphanages. The concerned hierarchs, priests and parishes handling and running these orphanages and care centres in Kenya have had difficulty raising resources locally and abroad during this COVID-19 period. While the church continues to feed traditional orphanages, it constantly invites or has the concerned clergy visit the concerned children at their homes, most often taking food to them and their families. After the gathering restrictions were relaxed during the second phase of reopening religious institutions in Kenya, the AOCK is, according to respondent 1, “constantly invited these children and their families as well as other needy families in the localities” to visit these same institutions “for sensitisation on COVID-19 and to offer them food subsidies.”³⁷ The present COVID-19 pandemic has shown how much the earlier AOCK proposal to eliminate traditional orphanages and instead encourage foster care in their institutions has helped them manage most of these children and their needs. The fact that many are still in dire need, even at their homes and foster homes, although there was an already existing rapport and identification of the needy to offer assistance to families before COVID-19, made it easier.

4.4. Feeding Programmes

One of the greatest challenges that poorest families face is feeding themselves and feeding nutritiously, especially with the one available meal a day among

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Respondent 2 and 5, 2020.

³⁷ Respondent 1, 2021.

most poor families.³⁸ Going to school is, in most instances, the best chance for children from poor families to get some food.³⁹ School feeding programmes also serve as incentives for improving school attendance, reducing child labour, alleviating short-term hunger, positively impacting nutrition and energy intake, and bringing change to the lives of poor families by educating their children.⁴⁰ During holidays and in crisis situations, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, when schools are closed, many children go without food.⁴¹

Between 1980 and 1995, the government of Kenya introduced and offered milk to all primary and pre-primary school children to boost the health and diet of school-going children. In most cases, this was the only meal that these children received in a day, while for some, it was the only mineral-rich food they had in a day. Kenya has not had other national school feeding programmes. Most schools in Kenya have offered home-grown school meal programmes initiated by the school management or funded by Faith-Based Organisations, Non-Governmental Organisations, individual well-wishers or by the government only if the schools are in remote areas with extreme conditions and needs.⁴²

“The Orthodox Church in Kenya has found that feeding programs are a necessity for school going-children, thus have introduced them in all their fully operational pre-primary, primary, secondary and semi-orphanage schools. [In some areas,] our church also offers food and food for the students to take home with them so that they can share with their families.”⁴³ Following the AOCK website and the diocesan bishops’ social media sites will show the AOCK hierarchs distributing food to children and their parents to feed at home and/or share with their neighbours.⁴⁴ Some local parishes have also contributed to such feeding programmes in their church schools or parish compounds, although lower than the diocesan-funded ones.

One feeding programme that has been at the forefront is the Saint Clement Primary School feeding programme in Riruta-Nairobi County. This school was established at the beginning of the new millennium to help the

³⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization 2009.

³⁹ World Food Programme 2013.

⁴⁰ Jomaa, McDonnell and Probart 2011; United Nations Children’s Fund 2005.

⁴¹ Borkowski, Hares and Minardi 2020.

⁴² Cf. “Case Study 9: Kenya – Home Grown School Meals Programme” in Drake, Woolnough, Burbano and Bundy 2016, 281–307.

⁴³ Respondent 5, 2019.

⁴⁴ Facebook Pages n.d.

most underprivileged families in Riruta who came for food rations from the AOCK headquarters next to the Patriarchal Seminary in Nairobi. “Most of the children of this school are orphaned while some come from single mothers’ units, HIV / AIDS infected and affected families, families with elderly parents, non-working parents and grandparents, and generally poor families.”⁴⁵

This AOCK school’s aim is to offer the best private school level of education to vulnerable, poor and disadvantaged pupils, which no public school could offer them, and thus offer these children a better chance of joining good high schools that will help them get national exam grades that are needed to join the university. It is such acts and initiatives that help eliminate the recurring cycle of poverty in these vulnerable families by offering them the opportunity to attain first generations of high school, tertiary college and university graduates. “At Saint Clement Primary School we also offer our pre-primary and primary school students free tuition, uniforms and shoes, sanitary towels for the girls, breakfast and lunch, and sometimes food and clothing for the pupils’ families, some Orthodox catechetical education, and a career choice and development run under the sponsorship of *Filantropia* in Finland.”⁴⁶ “Saint Clement has a general school curriculum run by qualified teachers mainly from our Teachers College [Orthodox College of Africa] among other local Kenyan universities,” thus, the quality of education is assured, as noted by Respondent 10.

“Saint Clement Primary School is mainly funded by Orthodox mission groups from abroad, including *Filantropia* in Finland, OCMC in USA, the Archdiocese of Australia, as well as individuals, foundations and parishes majorly from Cyprus and Greece.”⁴⁷ “The *Sophia Foundation* and well-wishers from Cyprus who offer us Euro 20 per month have substantially assisted the many feeding programmes found in our country [Kenya]. *Filantropia* has helped continue following up with our primary school’s graduates, during and after their high school and college/university education, by giving them career guidance and skills, under a programme run by one of the very first teachers of this school, Teacher Virginia [Gathoni].”⁴⁸ COVID-19 government closures affected this school like all others in the country, and more so in daily feeding and caring for the children. Nevertheless, the pupils and their pa-

⁴⁵ Respondent 8, 2019.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Respondent 5, 2019.

⁴⁸ Respondent 10, 2013.

rents have constantly been invited by their main guardian, Archbishop Makarios Tillyrides of Nairobi, to pick up food supplies for their families from the school compound.⁴⁹

The AOCK hierarchs and priests are seen constantly giving food supplies to vulnerable families and those affected by COVID-19 in other areas of the country. The assistance is given to both Orthodox Christians and other Kenyans affected irrespective of their faith affiliations. The areas that have been highly targeted are especially those where people have no farms, including the slum areas, the densely populated areas and the areas susceptible to drought. Some of these emergency philanthropic diakonia activities are sometimes covered by the national television and radio stations but are also visible on the concerned hierarchs, diocesan, clergy or parish social media pages.⁵⁰ The funds used in these endeavours come from abroad, while some are locally raised. The foreign funding has gone to historic lows, probably because even donors are also affected. The local funding at this juncture is mainly food coming from local farmers or locals who buy from the local farmers and bring the same to church. While the local church's weekly food offerings are not enough to cover the growing numbers of affected families, they still have considerable impact. The local offerings are easily done during the COVID-19 period because this is what many parishes, especially in the central region of Kenya, do every Sunday, and especially during the Lenten season.

4.5. Microfinance and sacco programmes

The AOCK has been involved in offering grants and loans for the personal development of Orthodox Christians who are primarily in the lower middle class and those identified as poor, who would ordinarily not be considered for commercial bank loans. According to interviews done with AOCK leaders, senior managers and group leaders of associations, microfinance and Sacco programmes within the AOCK, done progressively from 2013 to 2021, the AOCK finance and resource mobilisation projects have had substantial contributions and positive impacts on the lives of the locals. Several bottom-up programmes offering Orthodox Christians a chance to get money during their troubled times can attest to the efficiency and usefulness of these contextualised programmes.

⁴⁹ Kenya Television Network (KTN) 2020c.

⁵⁰ Kenya Television Network (KTN) 2020a, 2020b, 2020d

The existing AOCK microfinance and Sacco institutions have helped sustain most Orthodox families, helped them start new businesses and livelihoods after losing their jobs during COVID-19, and helped some of the laity, priests and parishes pay their monthly utility bills and parish salaries. These institutions being based within the church are friendly in the process of acquiring loans and the interest rates, as shall be noted in each of them. These very reasons have made these microfinance and resource mobilisation projects the port of call for many lay Orthodox Christians and clergy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.5.1. AOCK foreign-led faith-based organisations

The localised programmes seem to have come up after the foreign ones failed to work countless times. “The *Kenya Orthodox Development Mission* (KODM) was started in the year 2000 as an Orthodox-led Faith Based Organisations (FBO), the first of its kind in Kenya. It was run under *Filantropia* of the Finnish Orthodox Church, with most funds contributed by the government of Finland,”⁵¹ and the rest from the leadership of the AOCK. KODM established schools, offered school fees and higher education scholarships to many Kenyans and initiated farming programmes but failed in 2005 due to hierarchical interference, as noted by Respondents 6 and 7. *Social Economic Foundation* (SOFED) was “started as the second FBO under the Orthodox Church in Kenya in 2007, to help ease the funding options and project management away from direct religious control,”⁵² having learnt how to do that from KODM. SOFED was especially helpful in helping obtain grants and aid from countries, institutions and individuals that did not necessarily want to work directly with religious bodies. The funds for this foundation were meant for development work similar to KODM. SOFED was especially known for offering high school and college school fees scholarships and grants to needy students, an aspect that Respondents 4, 11 and 12 confirmed as having benefited their families, their parishioners and the poor in their communities. “SOFED and its activities ended in 2011 after the board and the chairperson expressed divergent plans.”⁵³

⁵¹ Respondent 8, 2021.

⁵² Respondent 5, 2013.

⁵³ Respondent 7, 2020.

Between 1995 and 2001, “Kenya received one Cypriot lawyer Nikos Patikis, who did many philanthropic works in Cyprus, and who was a former mayor of Limassol and a renowned Cypriot minister of finance during the presidency of H.B. Archbishop Makarios Mouskos of Cyprus. At the age of 90, Lawyer Patikis came to Kenya with about BP400,000 to try and help out some Kenyans.”⁵⁴ He planned to offer funds to poor Kenyans who wanted to be entrepreneurs or those who wanted to be involved in joint business endeavours and farming initiatives. According to Respondents 1, 5 and 6, Mr Patikis refused the help and involvement of the Archdiocese and so was facilitated and let loose to do his projects in whatever parishes he so wished. Many Kenyans presented their proposals to him and were awarded the money they needed after signing some papers with the lawyer. Most of these Kenyans, having been accustomed to grants from foreigners who came to them through the Archdiocese, thought this was a grant project. Unfortunately, because “there was no direct involvement of the Church, not much was unveiled on the criteria behind who was funded and how much was awarded to them,”⁵⁵ that is until much later when scanty information and some paperwork was found. After some time, Lawyer Patikis started asking for the repayment of his money through the Archdiocese, who advised the lawyer to go directly to whomever he gave the money, considering that the church was not involved in the project from the initial stage.⁵⁶ The Kenyan recipients, who had assumed the money they had received to be a grant, were hesitant to pay back, so the project ended. This philanthropic effort “impacted very negatively on Lawyer Patikis, his family and life, an act that the Church of Kenya highly regrets for not knowing how to handle the situation and at a timely fashion.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Lawyer Patikis remains a memory to many Kenyans for his kind heart and assistance to many poor Orthodox Christians in Kenya to establish small businesses and farms that are still assisting them until now.

The *Orthodox Towers Management Company Limited* (OTMC Ltd) was formed in 2016 as an investment company for the *Holy Archbishopric of Irinoupolis Limited* (est. 1968) that became the *Holy Archbishopric of Kenya and Irinoupolis* in 2005 and currently the *Orthodox Archbishopric of Kenya Limited* as of 2016. “The locals are always never highly involved in these or other past companies that

⁵⁴ Respondent 1, 2020; Confirmed by Respondent 5, 2020.

⁵⁵ Respondent 1, 2020.

⁵⁶ Respondent 1, 5 and 7, 2020.

⁵⁷ Respondent 1, 2020.

are run within the AOCK, rather the Greek or Cypriot bishops heading the Kenyan Church do so.”⁵⁸ The non-inclusivity of the locals in these companies’ decision-making tables forced the AOCK leadership to sue the expatriate leaders and companies to overturn what the locals thought were bad decisions, but failed to win almost every time.⁵⁹ At its formation, OTMC Ltd had two Kenya-born diocesan bishops as directors (OTMC Ltd), but currently has one, the other died in 2019. This company bought a house in Upper Hill-Nairobi County, from part of the highly contested KES 600 Million (USD 600,000), most of it originally raised and invested in stocks from resources raised by the seating Metropolitan Seraphim Kykkotis and his predecessors Metropolitan Makarios and Metropolitan Ireneos.⁶⁰ “The proceeds for this house were meant to be divided in percentages among the Kenyan dioceses to reduce their overreliance on foreign aid. At the moment, the house seems to not be doing what it was meant to do as it is run by the OTMC Ltd lawyer who seems to have divergent views from us all.”⁶¹ Nothing much has been noted or reported about having happened to OTMC or their project during COVID-19.

4.5.2. AOCK localised models: the clergy and their spouses’ associations

The clergy and their spouses’ associations are common among the Orthodox in Kenya and are known for evaluating and managing the welfare of the clergy and their families. Following Respondent 11 and 12, these clergy families discussed the management of their challenges and experiences and “raise funds that they lend to each other or buy properties” that they later sold and divided the profits among the members. This seems like a widely accepted practice among the clergy in central Kenya, who have formed many clergy and presbyteres (priests’ wives) associations. These associations have been the lifeline of the member presbyters and presbyteres, considering that their loan funds are easily accessible and their interest rates are extremely low. Some of these associations are known to allow their members to “take some of their savings, to help manage their lives without worrying about paying anything

⁵⁸ Respondent 5, 2019.

⁵⁹ High Court Cases- Kenya 2014a, 2015a and 2015c

⁶⁰ Fayo 2014; Respondent 5, 2019.

⁶¹ Respondent 2, 2020.

back or paying interests as things settle.”⁶² These associations highly assisted the priests and their spouses in getting loans that assisted them in paying their monthly bills during COVID-19, when the church struggled with paying their salaries and monthly stipends. Some of the major clergy and their wives’ associations, especially in Kenya’s central region, shall be reviewed below.

The *Orthodox Priests Union in Kenya Trust Fund* (OPU) was formed in 1990, starting as a 12-member association. It was OPU that initiated fundraising for the clergy in Kenya so that they could own cars to “give a better image of the Orthodox priests in Kenya,”⁶³ and buy plots that could be shared among the members or be sold to raise revenue for the members’ welfare. A trend highly emulated by most clergy and presbyters’ associations in Kenya. OPU’s current capital through its members’ savings and their properties in Embakasi and Naivasha puts this clergy association at an approximate worth of KES 6 million (USD 60,000).⁶⁴ OPU stands as “the only clergy association that was widespread, involving Orthodox clergy from Nairobi, Kiambu, Nyeri, Laikipia, Nyandarwa, Nakuru and remains the oldest clergy association in Kenya,”⁶⁵ that is still running, although most of their founding members have long died.

One of the most vibrant clergy and presbyteres’ associations in Kenya remains *Saint Nektarios Priests and Papadhias Self-Help Group*, which was started in 1999. “It had 12 priests and their wives at the time of its formation, but currently has 28 couples and four widowed prebyteres, with most of their member priests and presbyteres hailing from Kiambu, Nakuru and Nairobi Counties.”⁶⁶ Following Respondent 25, this group offers loans to members from their over KES 3 million (USD 30,000) savings coming from their monthly contributions, personal savings and dividends from market shares. Saint Nektarios’ projects are seasonal and voluntary for the members. All of their development projects, mainly buying and selling properties, are done under a different set of leadership. “Once enough funds are raised for a project, we buy a property worth the funds and after some years we sell it, and the project funds are then shared among the contributing members according to their shares, before we close that project and raise money for the next one.”⁶⁷

⁶² Respondent 4, 2013.

⁶³ Respondent 20, 2020.

⁶⁴ Respondents 20, 21 and 22, 2020.

⁶⁵ Respondent 5, 2020.

⁶⁶ Respondent 23, 2020.

⁶⁷ Respondent 24, 2020.

According to Respondent 22, due to the members' inadequate finance, they tended to avoid reinvesting with the same money from the previous project, and instead, each spent their shared funds privately, most doing personal projects with it. This association holds monthly meetings at a different member's home. They also hold an annual holiday trip for all the members to break the culture of African clergymen and their spouses not having time to relax, a much appreciated and awaited annual social event.

The clergy of Nairobi and Kajiado counties initiated a clergy association in the year 2000 under the name *Saint Anthony Priests and Papadhias Welfare Group*. The association was "saving money for the future of ten-member clergymen and their presbyteres, who visited and cared for each other, especially in times of hardship."⁶⁸ The financial savings of this group were mainly used to fund the personal projects and businesses of the members.⁶⁹

The *Holy Transfiguration Orthodox Priests Welfare Association (HOTOPRIWA)* was formed in 2011 by 15 priests. HOTOPRIWA has tended to be an exclusive membership association of senior clergy and a few younger ones who felt excluded from other existing clergy associations. Their focus has been the financial, psychological, social and family welfare of their members. "HOTOPRIWA raises most of its revenue through monthly contributions, although we also have been involved in the buying and selling of vehicles and the purchase of market shares."⁷⁰ For accessing funds within the group, their members can "access their savings by requesting it, but must leave a certain percentage in their account, or otherwise obtain loans with no interest from our capital of about KES 2 million (USD 20,000)."⁷¹ Their current membership is eight members, having lost a few members due to no payment of dues and most of the older members through death. "The wives of the married members are only involved in an annual party of the group done on their patron saint day (6 August) or during the Christmas season annual group party. These presbyteres are also accorded an annual financial bonus/dividend separate from that of their husbands, while the unmarried clergy members receive the bonus directly."⁷² Holding the monthly meetings at a church and not at the members' homes and excluding the married clergy wives in the monthly

⁶⁸ Respondent 27, 2020.

⁶⁹ Respondent 26, 27 and 28, 2020.

⁷⁰ Respondent 4, 2020.

⁷¹ Respondent 5, 2020.

⁷² Respondent 4, 2020.

meetings helps accommodate more unmarried and widowed priests in this association. The wives of the members have created a sisterhood. According to Respondent 4 and 5, if a member dies, their wife receives all their dues, for she cannot continue to be a member of HOTOPRIWA on her own; another incentive to make the unmarried clergy feel okay to be members of HOTOPRIWA. This association also belongs to Miliki SACCO.

One of the youngest clergy associations in Kenya is *Saint Anthony Priests and Catechists Self-Help Group (STAPRICA)*, based in Kiambu County, central Kenya. This group “started in 2012 and currently has a membership of fourteen priests and two catechists and their wives. The men originally met at a central meeting point every month, and the women met at each other’s homes, but currently STAPRICA meets at the members’ homes and their wives join them after every three to four months for a joint meeting and once annually for a party.”⁷³ This group is highly focused on investing by having their members save some money every month and offer loans to those who need them. The group is also uniquely known for helping each other in the dowry, probably due to the young age of the majority of its members. This group “is worth around KES 1.2 million (USD 12,000). This association has a project program that is meant to offer dividends to the members.”⁷⁴ They are also members of the OCSSL SACCO, where they save and get loans.

4.5.3. AOCK localised models: SACCOS

The foreign-led organisations having failed to offer the local Orthodox Christians resources to help uplift their lives, the AOCK adherents came up with localised and sustainable financing alternatives, widely known as savings and credit cooperative societies (Sacco). The first of its kind was the *Orthodox SACCO*, which started after “a meeting held at Saints Nicholas and Anastasios Riruta in 2003 to help the AOCK clergy and lay workers. The members would hence save and borrow from the kitty with minimal interest, with the loan being guaranteed by other fellow members’ money solving the need for loan collateral.”⁷⁵ Many AOCK members took loans to start “small scale farms, buy land, build homes, start businesses, buy vehicles, and to buy farm

⁷³ Respondent 30, 2020.

⁷⁴ Respondent 31, 2020.

⁷⁵ Respondent 5, 2013; confirmed by Respondent 6, 2020.

animals, with others obtaining school fee loans to upgrade their own or/and their children's education especially at the university level."⁷⁶ This SACCO was highly affected by the 2008–2012 global financial crisis, which prompted the Orthodox clergy and archdiocese employees not to receive their salaries for months to over one and a half years. This led many to default in paying their loans and their fixed monthly savings, which almost halted the SACCO. After failing to come to amicable solutions with the Archdiocese leadership on the payment of workers' subscriptions and outlying loans deficits, "the SACCO was forced by law to take the Orthodox Church to court to try and manage and mitigate their assets losses as well as the members' loans and monthly subscriptions. After winning the case in 2014, the SACCO received all its outstanding monies in 2016."⁷⁷ Subsequently, the SACCO rebranded itself to signal that it was not centralised or directly associated with the Orthodox Church in 2013 and became *Miliki SACCO*. *Miliki SACCO* is open to all Kenyans, not just Orthodox Christians, with most of the original Orthodox members of the SACCO having left during the financial crisis, most of them having suffered major losses due to being loan guarantors and many others owning dormant accounts to date. Currently, "the SACCO is worth over KES 100 million (USD 1 million), out of which, a considerable number of Orthodox Christians and clergy, have acquired emergency loans, school fees loans and salary advances."⁷⁸ It is such AOCK workers and "members of the SACCO that have managed to pay their monthly bills and helped their extended families that have been laid-off to manage their daily lives at this very limiting and demanding financial times of COVID-19."⁷⁹ The SACCO is very accommodating in the repayment schedules considering that most of its members work for the AOCK, where salaries have had considerable hitches due to the COVID-19-related financial crisis.

The *Orthodox Church SACCO Society Limited* (OCSSL) was initiated by the current eight Thogoto Orthodox parish churches within Kiambu Vicarage in 2011. "This SACCO was meant to be an Orthodox Father's Association⁸⁰ project to help them save and obtain loans with low interest rates that would assist and uplift their personal lives, and simultaneously, create a fund that

⁷⁶ Respondent 6, 2020.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*; cf. High Court Cases Kenya 2014b and 2015b.

⁷⁸ Respondent 6, 2020.

⁷⁹ Respondent 7, 2020.

⁸⁰ The name given to the formal group of Orthodox men in each Orthodox parish in Kenya.

would assist their parishes in saving and borrowing from the same kitty for their parish development work.”⁸¹ Following Respondents 17 and 19, OCSSL started with “KES 100 (USD 1) worth of shares per individual member and subsequent monthly savings,” with the “share price increasing to KES 200 (USD 2) in 2014 and currently reaching KES 500 (USD 5).” After the SACCO grew considerably in both membership and funds, it was able to offer loans to member parishes and individuals in the millions. Some of the loan recipients bought “public service buses, farm animals, financed their old or new businesses, built and renovated their homes and business premises, built and renovated their churches, church offices and parish buildings, paid salaries for their parish workers and built rental houses in the parish compounds among others.”⁸² This SACCO offers a loan that is not more than three times a members’ savings, with a 1% reducing balance interest rate and a maximum of two years for repayment. Since the SACCO collects no collateral, the borrowing member must also have at least three guarantors from the SACCO members who would cover the loan in case of defaulting, with the insurance covering loss due to death. According to their books, the OCSSL SACCO offers loans worth about Kenya Shillings 1–2 million every month, with members applying on the set Sunday morning of the month right after the Divine Liturgy and getting their cheque by the end of the day. The monthly meetings are held interchangeably at each of the eight parishes that started the OCSSL SACCO. This SACCO gave a 6% dividend in 2019 and 2020, demonstrating its speedy and steady growth. Although the OCSSL was originally meant for members of the Orthodox Fathers’ Association in the region, “in 2017 the SACCO opened its doors to Orthodox women, men and youth beyond Kikuyu region where it started, to other Orthodox parishes in Kiambu county and Kenya. The SACCO is also planning to expand its services to non-Orthodox members in the next three years, having delayed to do so because the SACCO did not wish for the non-Orthodox to take over this institution, especially if they joined with more money than the mostly poor and low-earning Orthodox Christians and parishes who founded the SACCO.”⁸³ According to their audited annual accounts, the OCSSL now owns over KES 11.5 million (USD 115,000), with over 250 members. This SACCO has been the major port of call for the Kiambu clergy and laity, who are members, particularly at these challenging times of

⁸¹ Respondent 16, 2020.

⁸² Respondent 18, 2020.

⁸³ Respondent 16, 2020.

COVID-19. Some were getting short- and long-term loans and others salary advance so that they could manage their family's daily lives and monthly utilities and pay for school fees. "Some of those who sort for long-term loans started new businesses with others starting new farming projects having lost their former jobs due to COVID-19. Many parishes got funds here to pay for their workers' salaries."⁸⁴ This has made this SACCO an invaluable institution for Orthodox parishes and parishioners during the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic shocks.

4.5.4. AOCK localised models: Mothers' Union

"The Mothers' Union⁸⁵ remains the most active group in all spheres of the Orthodox Church in Kenya. They are mainly known for creating learning spaces on matters of church, parenting, childcare, personal development, gender related matters, healthcare, family, society and development among others."⁸⁶ They invite experts to teach them, and with time most of them accumulate enough knowledge to train and teach others. The Mothers' Union is also involved in many projects, some benefiting the church and others the members, "we do fundraisings for development projects within the parishes. We also have personal development projects including raising funds by saving money on a weekly basis to buy each other clothing, utensils and cutlery."⁸⁷ Professionally run self-help groups among the Mothers' Union are mostly encountered in Western Kenya. One such project was initiated by the Finnish Orthodox Mission, which included initiating a maize milling shop and a bakery for the Mothers' Union of Saint Andrew Gimengwa, which they managed as an income-generating activity for the group, parishioners and members.⁸⁸

The Kiambu Orthodox Mothers' Union⁸⁹ has been involved in various projects, including "building church kitchens, church offices and church halls in their respective parishes. The halls and kitchens are used by

⁸⁴ Respondent 19, 2020.

⁸⁵ The name given to the formal group of Orthodox women in each Orthodox parish in Kenya.

⁸⁶ Respondent 2, 2020.

⁸⁷ Respondent 9, 2020.

⁸⁸ Lounela 2007, 249.

⁸⁹ Kiambu Orthodox Mothers' Union, 2013.

the church, and also rented out for money to outsiders who needs catering and to hold meetings within the church compound.”⁹⁰ A joint Kiambu Mothers’ Union team comprising “16 parishes has been building a KES 30 million (USD 300,000) business complex since 2010, on a land in Muguga-Kiambu County, which we bought and set up a few semi-permanent rental houses under the leadership of the late Presbytera Sophia Wairimu Ndwaru. The building is still on its foundational level, so far having managed to raise about KES 300,000-500,000 (USD 3000-5000) for this project.”⁹¹ This Mothers’ Union-led development project remains the largest project ever initiated by local Orthodox Christians in Kenya. The surviving old ladies who initiated this project are very enthusiastic about it and, led by their current chairlady, may need much help if they wish to see their development vision come true. Their “goal is to use the proceeds of this project as a foundational kitty for paying the clergy in Kenya from locally raised funds and to stop the over-reliance on foreign aid”, says Respondent 9 enthusiastically.

During COVID-19, instead of concentrating on this historic project, the Mothers’ Union groups have been seen collaboratively assisting widows, single mothers, the aged and the poor. Their assistance, especially in central Kenya, is in “visiting these vulnerable groups in small numbers, and also offering them the food we gather amongst ourselves either from our members’ farms or having bought them in the farmers markets and retail shops” as reported by Respondent 9.

5. Results

This qualitative study has highlighted several concepts about philanthropic diakonia during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya, showing the imperative-ness of having a system in place, for such is what the church can use to help society during life critical moments. While many Kenyans lost their livelihoods during COVID-19, the church could only reach and help a few of them because of limited resources and sustainable systems. Where the systems were in place, as the case with the AOCK financial institutions, this study shows that the church was a place for Orthodox Christians to come and get solutions. Those who are not members of these financial institutions, such as

⁹⁰ Respondent 22, 2020.

⁹¹ Respondent 9, 2020.

the Sacco and clergy associations, are restricted to the loan facilities, but those who were already members had much easier resolve of their financial-related problems. For non-AOCK members, the only resolve was to get into the limited government cash transfer systems or use the normal banking systems that had interest rates of 16–22%, burdening them even more. Therefore, these AOCK financial systems should think beyond helping their members if not helping others in society start such beneficial institutions for themselves.

The issue of aid dependency is noted as a challenging matter within philanthropic diakonia of the AOCK. During COVID-19, many AOCK philanthropic diakonia were halted, and some were not done as usual due to dependency. While aid has its importance, especially when it assists the poor, it is important to be aware of where it could hurt the recipients if not managed well and in creating sustainable systems for the recipients to allow them to be generally independent. Nevertheless, interdependency is also seen in the AOCK diakonia, where foreign-raised philanthropic aid was instrumental in helping initiate and pay for local projects that the AOCK could not do on their own. Such partnerships included projects such as water drilling and rig purchase and the creation of failed faith-based organisations, as noted in this study. This shows the importance of authentic and well-organised philanthropic diakonia partnerships and why dependency should be managed in diakonia initiatives.

This study has also highlighted localised models of doing philanthropic diakonia. These AOCK institutions and programmes initiated at the local level are meant for locally defined situations that are handled in local ways, by local organisational structures and in sustainable ways that were highly successful even in their limited ways. These models are best seen in the AOCK microfinance and sacco projects, the clergy and presbyteres-related associations, and the Mothers' Union. The Mothers Union and presbyteres example in this study shows the place of women in philanthropic diakonia and how it has impacted and continues to impact the AOCK. If the Mothers' Union plans to build a business complex succeeds, these women may resolve an almost century-old problem for the AOCK. Avoiding traditional orphanages is another plus for the AOCK, for having foster families care for the orphans, the poor and disadvantaged children, highly helped during the pandemic. The traditional orphanages demanded continued support, even when no foreign aid was available during the pandemic. But due to embracing foster families, the AOCK at this juncture only offered what was available to these families.

Farming and highly active feeding programmes within the AOCK were identified as paramount in this study. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic when many Kenyans were suffering from lack of money even to buy food, due to loss of jobs and closing of businesses and industries during the national and citywide lockdowns and curfews, and their after effects. Nevertheless, there is a need for much improvement in food security programmes within the AOCK. The Nairobi Seminary farming programmes need to be made compulsory or a way found to entice a bigger number of its graduates, if at all the future clergy and church leaders taught there will pass on the much-needed models of sustainable livelihoods and food safety to their parishioners and the surrounding communities. Concurrently, the AOCK ecumenical diakonia needs to be expanded so that there is more cooperation between the AOCK philanthropic diakonia and other religious and civil society groupings and the government. Such joint initiatives would have a greater impact on society when it comes to development and diakonia.

6. Conclusion

From the first COVID-19 announcement in Nairobi on 12 March 2020, many Kenyans were affected by the many ensuing deaths, hospitalisation of many, losses of jobs and livelihoods and psychosocial challenges. These COVID-19 events left the poor and the middle class extremely vulnerable. The church is expected to offer its services of diakonia to society, particularly during troubled times when society needs the most assistance. This study has shown how the Orthodox Church in Kenya handled its philanthropic diakonia and the systems they used. While philanthropic diakonia is inherent in the nature and mission of the church, systems need to be put in place to make its programmes run smoothly. The dire need for sustainable systems is noted by looking at the AOCK philanthropic diakonia during COVID-19. The AOCK offered relief food, low-interest loans, water, farming alternatives, and other philanthropic diakonia initiatives. Some were directed towards Orthodox Christians, and others were directed towards anyone who needs help in society.

According to this study, what highly assisted those economically affected during COVID-19 was mainly not the much-needed relief food among other relief assistance given out by the AOCK during the COVID-19 period.

Rather, the localised funding system that the church had in place. Such funds helped these Kenyans restart and initiate other forms of livelihoods during the pandemic, placing them at the rehabilitation stage. The sustainability and ease of access of these localised systems and institutions that loaned out money to the locals helped them return to living stable lives, bringing them to the development level. Such positive relief, rehabilitation and development successional achievements should be emulated and replicated. Further, the noted AOCK philanthropic diakonia activities were funded in three ways, through partnerships, direct foreign aid and locally mobilised funding, with each having its place of significance and effects. This study revealed the philanthropic diakonia of the AOCK before and during COVID-19, and also shows room for improvement.

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A total of 39 interviews were conducted with 31 senior national leaders from the four AOCK dioceses and those responsible with running the AOCK social development projects. The interviews were conducted between January 2013 and January 2021. For ethical purposes, the interviews were codified to maintain confidentiality, and the respondents were referred to in the text as Respondent 1 to Respondent 31, while the year denotes the timeline that the interview was done. The author of this article is in possession of the material.

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@Orthodox Diocese of Kisumu and Western Kenya Facebook page

@Orthodox Diocese of Nyeri and Mt Kenya

Abstract

Evangelos Thiani, Afrikkalainen ortodoksinen filantrooppinen diakonia Keniassa ennen COVID-19-pandemiaa ja sen aikana.

Kirkon elämässä, teologiassa ja toiminnassa on kaikkina aikoina esiintynyt filantrooppista diakoniaa. Idän kirkko on osoittanut erityistä pastoraalista huolenpitoa pandemioiden aikana niin Raamatun aikana, varhaiskirkossa kuin nykyajassa. Tässä artikkelissa osoitetaan, että kirkon aktiivisuus pastoraalisessa ja filantrooppisessa diakoniassa normaalioloissa edesauttaa diakoniahankkeiden käynnistämistä vaikeina aikoina. Afrikkalainen ortodoksinen kirkko Keniassa (AOCK) ja sen neljä Aleksandrian kreikkalaisen patriarkaatin alaista hiippakuntaa ovat hyvä nykyhetken esimerkki ortodoksisen kirkon diakoniahankkeista. Kenian kirkko on tarjonnut yhteiskunnassa suoraa ja välillistä humanitaarista tukea normaali- ja poikkeusaikoina. Osa kirkon filantrooppisen diakonian toimista on mahdollistanut suurelle osalle ortodokseja arkielämän hallinnan jo ennen ensimmäistä COVID-19-tapausta maaliskuussa 2020. Kirkon toiminnan tarve on entisestään korostunut koronapandemian aikana ja siirryttäessä sen jälkeiseen aikaan. Deskriptiivis-tulkitsevalla otteella toteutettu artikkeli osoittaa yhtäältä millaista filantrooppista diakoniaa Kenian ortodoksinen kirkko on tehnyt COVID-19-pandemian aikana. Toisaalta se tuottaa tietoa tavasta, jolla Kenian kirkon filantrooppinen diakonia on järjestetty. Kirjallisten lähteitten rinnalla artikkelin aineiston muodostavat 39 haastattelua, jotka on tehty neljän vuoden ajalla AOCK:n johtohenkilöitten keskuudessa. Artikkelin tuottaa arvokasta tietoa diakonian malleista, joita kirkko voi hyödyntää auttaakseen jäseniään ja yhteisöään kriisiaikoina.