Sisters in Spirit
Prichard, Andreana C.

Published by Michigan State University Press

Prichard, Andreana C.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/49704.
n 1926, Stella Mwenyipembe declared her intention to join six British nuns as the first “little sister” of the UMCA’s religious order for women. As a novice at the Community of the Sacred Passion (CSP) convent in Magila, a central station in northeastern Tanzania, Stella would have been tasked—in addition to studying for Holy Orders—with working with some of the 180 pupils in the girls’ school, in one of the local hospitals, or with local women in the district. This work would have been something with which Stella was well acquainted, having grown up around the CSP Sisters—as their student, patient, and fellow parishioner. Further, as the daughter of an African priest, Stella had firsthand knowledge of the religious life. Her father, Samwil Mwenyipembe, was in fact well known for his heroics as a sort of priest-turned-Renaissance-man during the First World War. Living with his family at an outstation near Magila when the war began, Mwenyipembe remained alone at the station after his colleagues either fled or were imprisoned. For several years Mwenyipembe assumed his colleagues’ responsibilities, tending singlehandedly to the spiritual and physical needs of a community that stretched several days’ walk in all directions: he performed services, repaired and maintained church buildings and farms, mediated between German officials and imprisoned church staff, allocated increasingly scarce resources to congregants and other remaining
staff, maintained the print shop, and was granted limited permission to perform marriage ceremonies, a rite usually reserved for the British members of staff. Thus it was likely with a clear understanding of the demands of the religious life that Stella Mwenyipembe entered the CSP in 1926.

Yet, despite this comprehensive understanding of the commitment she was about to undertake, Stella quit the order before taking permanent vows. In fact, Stella was not alone in her decision to leave the order: motivated by a range of complicated factors, African women repeatedly made what British church officials saw as “very brave attempt[s] in the face of enormous opposition” to join the order. Until Stella joined as a “little sister,” the CSP had been the exclusive purview of British women. Founded in 1911 by the UMCA’s Bishop Weston, the order was a response to the very Tractarian desire of some of the mission’s administrators and female workers to offer the opportunity for aspirants to formally pledge themselves to a life of poverty, prayer, chastity, and service in Africa. The order’s founder and earliest sisters had high hopes (though low expectations) that the community would eventually incorporate African women. And indeed, it was not until 1946 that an African woman was able to persist in her quest to take Holy Orders.

A celibate religious order was in many ways the logical outgrowth of the values of religious asceticism, monasticism, and retirement at the heart of Tractarianism. Attending to emotions and affects such as fear and discontent, striving and aspiration, faith and self-sacrifice, we see that a religious order has long served as an opportunity for Christian African women to forge a unique subjectivity. Not only did novices form intimate, affective spiritual relationships among themselves, but they also became evangelists for the UMCA’s affective spiritual community writ large. Profession also allowed aspirants to embed themselves more firmly within the church community, and granted them opportunities to assert more control over the nature of the burgeoning spiritual community. In so doing, women from what became Chama cha Mariamu Mtakatifu (CMM) deployed longer-standing values in order to build a new type of community.

Tractarianism and the Religious Life in Britain

Historians of Tractarianism have noted the appeal of the revival movement to British women in particular—indeed, women were overrepresented among lay Anglo-Catholics generally, numbering between approximately 66 and 82 percent
of all London-area congregations. Contemporary Anglo-Catholics recognized the paradox implicit in this gendered appeal: one commentator remarked, “Men wrote the tracts for the Times... but it was women who first carried all this theory into practice.” Critics of the movement derided the imbalance among the laity as one of the movement’s many faults. The rector of Saint Mary-le-Port, Bristol, for example, lamented that the Anglo-Catholic priest “rules with despotic sway over ever so many young ladies, not a few old ones, some sentimental young gentlemen, and one or two old men in their dotage.” Other critics (and there were many) even went so far as to claim that the movement was a conspiracy driven by women: “The Ritual movement is a lay movement,” said a disgruntled curate in Paddington, “but it is more than that; it is a female movement... The ritualistic clergyman is led, or rather misled, by a few ladies, who have time and taste for ornamental work, for embroidering coloured stoles,chasubles, &c., and they allow themselves no rest until they have persuaded him to wear these things... to the intense gratification of a few zealots and the unbounded annoyance of many sensible people.” Dissenters derided female Tractarians as simpletons who found “one of the sweetest pleasures of their life in decorating chancels, and working vestments, and helping to make the service of the altar as splendid as they know how.” While the movement’s detractors often trivialized the involvement of women for their own political purposes, new religious movements, such as evangelical and middle-of-the-road Anglicanism, did tend to attract proportionately more women than men. While Anglo-Catholic churches may have served more than their share of women, the disproportion was little more than an exaggeration of a contemporary trend.

The particular allure of Anglo-Catholicism for Victorian British women is a hard thing to parse with much confidence, given the sources and nature of an inquiry into the fraught realm of “intention.” Despite what its detractors believed, Tractarianism had more to offer women than an opportunity to perfect their embroidery. To be sure, women without families could find refuge in Anglo-Catholic congregations as a femme dévotre, losing themselves in what was virtually full-time employment pursuing “a variety of activities useful and (in their own terms) important” to the functioning of the church.” The sociologist John Shelton Reed suggests that the ritualism of the service and the strength of Anglo-Catholic clerics may have been appealing to some unmarried women because it offered “authoritative dicta from clerical ‘fathers.’” Yet even if they were drawn in primarily by Tractarianism’s ritualism and authority, most women would not have characterized their positions within the church in terms as simple as their detractors did—as what one Oxfordshire
magistrate termed “clerical trammels.” While some women may have found in ritualism a sort of patriarchal authority missing in their own lives, many more were likely to have seen it as a challenge to the established patriarchy. For example, ritualists in England advocated for the separation of genders at worship. Not only was this move anti-class and anti-hierarchical, as it removed private and closed (for-purchase/by-donation) pews from the nave, but it was also thought to reduce “personal domestic feelings” as part of the worship experience. Fathers of families would no longer be recognized as such, and the range of social classes, gender, and other forms of privilege in the congregation melded into an “undifferentiated mass of worshipers.” Finally, mainline Protestants argued that the ritual of confession was an affront to Victorian family ideology because of its association with sins of the flesh. Priests were, according to popular opinion, “preparing themselves, by the study of filthy and obscene literature, to pollute the purity of our wives, daughters, and little children, by questions and suggestions on the most indecent of subjects”; the ritual’s “symbolic, if not actual, threat to domestic authority” might have in fact been attractive to women.

It is far more likely, however, that a complex amalgam of theological, political, and personal concerns drove British women to join the Tractarian revival in such great numbers. Perhaps nowhere was the allure of Anglo-Catholicism to women (and corresponding popular outrage) stronger than in the institutionalization of the celibate, monastic ideal. As early as the 1840s, and as a direct result of the Oxford Movement’s return to catholic values, Tractarians began to establish (or reestablish, as they saw it) the very sort of religious communities that the Church of England had done away with during the Reformation. While reformers had initially hoped that orders for both genders would flourish, the revival of sisterhoods was particularly successful. The first reformers to resurrect the idea of the sisterhood imagined that they would operate as a “refuge and resource: places of refuge for unmarried women and as sources of charitable relief and trained nurses to ameliorate the suffering of the poor.” In fact, the Oxford Movement’s own John Henry Newman wrote in 1835 that sisterhoods could “give dignity and independence to the position of women in society.” Affiliation with a convent could also, he believed, provide “a refuge for ‘redundant’ females, since, ‘as matters stand, marriage is the sole shelter which a defenseless portion of the community has against the rude world.’” The Oxford Movement’s Anglo-Catholics were not the only Protestants looking to expand the role of women in the church in the 1830s and 1840s. Quakers and other Nonconformist women, inspired by their liberal faith, were some of the first to speak
out for women's equality; at the same time, the Lutheran Pastor Fliedner opened a house for religious women in Kaiserwerth, Germany (later made famous by the work of Florence Nightingale), and also in 1837, Dom Prosper Gueranger inaugurated a new phase of the history of Benedictine life in France.\textsuperscript{18}

Despite a broader interest in the religious life for Protestant women in Britain and Europe, the movement's advocates faced considerable opposition to the idea. To be sure, contemporaries in the Church of England had long opposed the Tractarian revival movement. As John Shelton Reed argues, "Many of the practices championed by Anglo-Catholics were symbolic affronts—and in a few cases actual threats—to central values of Victorian middle-class culture. The movement's opponents were right to be offended. To some extent, they were meant to be offended."\textsuperscript{19} The ideal of religious life was not fundamentally different in this sense from the movement as a whole; it is, by definition, a withdrawal from and a protest against the standards and habits of the world.\textsuperscript{20} Indeed, the rise of sisterhoods must be seen as part of Tractarianism's "silent rebellion" against the restrictions placed on women by Victorian society. As Reed points out, "Sisterhood life took women out of their homes. It gave them important work and sometimes great responsibility. It replaced their ties to fathers, husbands, and brothers by loyalties to church and sisterhood. It demonstrated that there were callings for women of the upper and middle classes other than those of wife, daughter, and 'charitable spinster.' And it at least suggested that the religious life was the higher calling."\textsuperscript{21} This was precisely what the movement's detractors found so repulsive. At a time when society emphasized the sanctity of family life, a life of celibacy was "inevitably suspected as casting some slur on marriage, or at least as representing what was believed to be a higher way."\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, few outside Anglo-Catholic circles saw the allure of sisterhoods, and even fewer believed that the religious life was truly a more noble and more desirable life than that of marriage and motherhood. Some went so far as to argue that women's aspirations toward the celibate life were "going against nature."\textsuperscript{23} To anticipate my argument, these motivations to join and the near-inevitable objections that followed were not entirely dissimilar from those leveled by the families, friends, and neighbors of early African aspirants.

The few non-Tractarians who did see value in sisterhoods in the first half of the nineteenth century tended to see their value as largely secular. The more socially minded among the critics did concede some benefit to what was, to their minds, an otherwise pathetic trend. Given the appalling conditions of the poor, one of the more ambivalent onlookers wondered, was it not wise "to set aside our dislike of
clerical pretensions and of the eccentricities of devout women, and to encourage the vast body of unmarried Englishwomen to come forward to the relief of the destitute on their own terms? Not coincidentally, the first orders were decidedly philanthropic in nature, the ultimate justification for which stemmed from the scriptural encounter and was amplified by social context. The Community of Saint John the Baptist, Clewer, is one early example. Founded in 1852, Clewer was initially established as a refuge for prostitutes who wanted to leave the streets. Rather than send the women he encountered who were “given over to evil living” to a penitentiary for reform, as was popular at the time, the then-rector of Clewer argued that “the task of reclaiming these women was not one for paid workers, but could only be undertaken in a spirit of devotion and service.” As such, a “community of devoted women” was formed, an order that served as a model for many early communities. Significantly, it was the same community at Clewer, which had started as an alternative to a penitentiary for “outcasts of society,” that hosted Blandina Limo and others of Mbweni’s pupil-teachers when they were in England. The relationship between the UMCA and Clewer illuminates something of contemporary Britons’ perceptions of their African counterparts. It is not clear if, in visiting the school, Blandina and her colleagues were shadowing the British sisters to learn to work in service of “the relief of the destitute”—heathens in Africa—or if they themselves were seen as akin to the prostitutes, streetwalkers, and other women of ill repute the sisters served. Regardless, given the long history of paternalism and campaigns of moral uplift that plagued Britain’s relationship with Africa, there is a degree of irony in the UMCA’s relationship with Clewer as a training site for their female African congregants.

As for the Tractarians’ early female aspirants, many factors merged in their decision to join a sisterhood—for some it was a religious calling, for others it was a longing to help the poor or a desire for a career, whereas others were disinclined toward marriage or harbored an interest in living with other women. Like Anglo-Catholicism in general, life in a sisterhood was seen to give an unmarried woman “new and meaningful things to do” and a privileged space within which she could develop a career of service. Sisterhoods also “offered an alternative to a life of idleness or drudgery—exotic, but safely exotic, and cloaked in the respectability of religion.” For some, an ability to live openly and intimately with other women heightened the allure of religious sisterhoods. Communities put few restrictions on “emotional friendships”—often called “particular friendships”—between members. Clever, for example, held such intimacies to be a positive force in the community.
The order’s founder saw intimacy as integral to the mission of the community. She “would not have love [between members] crushed out but wisely directed” toward God above all. To a sister who was “very much attached to herself” she wrote: “I do not think you need to trouble yourself because you love me. As a fact you do. All efforts to think or feel otherwise will only be unreal and lead to no good. All you need strive for is to love God more . . . Love is of God; it is a Divine gift; do not seek to crush it.”

Ultimately the factors influencing aspirants were many and varied, and must not be conflated with our perceptions of modern-day celibates. Women today who join such groups “are invariably seen as being deeply devout: after all, the caring professions and communal living arrangements mean that women who wish to live with other women and work among the disadvantaged do not need to join sisterhoods to carry out these desires.” But for women in nineteenth-century Britain, such was not the case; women joined sisterhoods “who today would not dream of making such a choice, and we would be wrong in assuming that all Victorian sisters were profoundly religious.” As we move forward, we must keep the same in mind for the women who aspired to enter religious life as a member of the UMCA's sisterhood, the Community of the Sacred Passion. And indeed, the same must be seen to apply to the first generations of African aspirants—their motivations were mixed, and not easily disentangled from the host of other familial, social, and cultural changes that swept across East Africa at the time.

**Religious Life in East Africa: The Early Years**

Inspired by Tractarians’ revived interest in religious communities in England, Bishop Frank Weston sought the establishment of both a sister- and a brotherhood in service of the UMCA’s African mission. Before Weston’s term as bishop began, there was an attempt at opening a branch of the already-established Saint Raphael’s Sisters of Charity within the UMCA at Zanzibar, but the order withdrew. A short-lived Society of the Sacred Mission emerged for men, but in a reflection of broader trends, that society did not last; Weston’s efforts toward a sisterhood were more popular and longer-lived. In 1908, when Weston assumed the bishopric of the UMCA, he began the process of establishing a religious community for British women to work in service of the mission. In this early, whites-only version of a UMCA sisterhood, women who volunteered in Britain to join the order would
receive training and a passport to a life of service overseas. The Community of the Holy Name at Malvern agreed to train novices for the CSP, and the first novice was clothed in July 1908. Novice Honor Mary had previously worked at Magila with the UMCA, as had several of the order’s other early members. By May 1910 there were seven novices, all clothed, trained, and ready to sail for East Africa.

On May 29 the UMCA’s newest British sisters arrived at Zanzibar, sobered by the words of Frank Weston, who urged them to remember

the greatness of the responsibility which lies upon you. We have not only to found in the Diocese the Religious Life: we have to justify ourselves to the rest of the workers, who will probably regard the experiment with something akin to alert criticism: Everyone is anxious to be kind: you will have the prayers and sympathy of all: but it is only human to regard with critical eyes a movement within a society which separates some members from the rest, and implies a claim to a very close walk with God . . . The new life will be very difficult to you all, removed as you will be from the influence of the Malvern house; but God will be with you.

On August 7, 1911, Sisters Margarita, Mabel, Frances, Elise, Marjorie, and Honor Mary knelt before Frank Weston, bishop of Zanzibar, and took a vow dedicating themselves to God for life, in the service of His African people. Additionally, the CSP also added an order of “companion-sisters,” a community for British women who were drawn by God to “desire a life consecrated under definite rule, and feel themselves specially attracted to a life of sacrifice in the spirit of the sacred passion.” These “companion-sisters” would not take lifetime vows, but would take annual vows only, so that “women who cannot give up their home duties or leave their present avocations, may find in this order just that way of consecration they have long been seeking.” Some, were they prepared, would go to Africa for a short time to offer their special training and experiences. Aside from this and to a large extent, the history of the CSP falls out of the scope of this chapter, except as it relates to the development of the CMM.

When the community was founded, it was with the expectation that if African women ever expressed a desire to enter the religious life, they would join the CSP itself. Yet, repeated attempts by African women to join the order ended in failure. Two years after Stella’s aborted attempt to join the order, for example, a young woman named Esta declared her intention to join. Her road was not easy either. Novice Esta spent ten months at Kigongoi, a small village accessible by a very steep
road from the equally small village of Maramba, a good distance from the central
station at Magila, preparing for Holy Orders. Upon leaving home after a short
vacation from study, Esta faced physical intimidation, harassment, and abuse from
her resistive patrilineal kin. Esta’s mother and aunts followed her to the convent,
taunting her the whole way. After she had arrived at Msalabani, settled in, and
gone to bed, hammering at the gate awakened Esta and the entire compound.
The night guard found Esta’s father, a local teacher, at the gate in distress; when
the mother superior awoke and descended the stairs to see what was happening,
he “rushed at her, brandishing his stick.” As the mother retreated upstairs toward
safety, Lorenzo “rushed round to the other door which was shut, demanding that
his daughter be returned to him.” He then “threatened to break down the doors,
hammering and shouting all the time that he would take her by force, until the
whole Convent was awake.” A sister rang the church bell to rouse assistance from
the village, and summoned Padre Timotheo, a nearby priest. Timotheo struggled to
pacify Esta’s father, who “continued to threaten and shout that Novice Esta should
be returned to him.” Esta’s family evidently felt entitled to the rights-in-person
that Esta represented, and to the social and economic potential that she embodied,
and they were unrelenting. Not five weeks later, Esta’s father stalked her and some
companions as they were walking a lonely stretch of road and “threatened violence.”
The intimidation was more than Esta could stand, and she summarily quit the order
and returned to her family.40

The urge that Esta, Stella, and several other women felt to join a religious
order was not particularly unique. Indeed, a substantial literature has shown that
African women have long found new avenues to status, power, and independence
in the spiritual realm. Celibate religious orders of the early twentieth century were
thus no exception to a longer-standing pattern, and such orders attracted women
throughout the continent. In East Africa alone, Catholic Fipa women living in
northwestern Tanzania desired to emulate their European counterparts, seeking out
opportunities to join their mission’s religious community. Haya women in Tanzania
joined their white sisters, successfully organizing into a semiautonomous religious
community in the 1910s.41

And to be sure, women’s church organizations in general, especially those that
did not require a life profession and vows of celibacy and poverty, were popular
throughout Africa. Organizations such as Manyanos and Ruwadzano in southern
Africa, Chita chaMaria, and the Mothers’ Union (MU) in Anglican dioceses through-
out Africa were an easier sell for women, their families, and the church. The MU
was a popular organization among UMCA adherents for which no particular vows were required. Founded in Britain in 1876 by Mary Sumner, the MU operated on the philosophy that mothering was in and of itself a spiritual act, one that carried wide-ranging implications for society at large. The organization claimed that “female spirituality connected women’s familial function with a higher purpose of stabilizing the larger Christian community,” and held that prayer and devotional practices have significant social and political importance. As an institution, the MU placed a “high priority on female spirituality as the foundation of family, church, and national life, and accordingly garnered a wide reputation as strengthening the moral and spiritual foundation of the state.”

UMCA missionaries opened the first chapter of the MU in Tanganyika Territory in 1922. By 1938, Central Africa reported six MU branches in different parts of the diocese, with twenty-six African members and fifteen English-speaking members, and about sixty probationers. European MU leaders trained their African protégées in much the same way that African teachers and clerics’ wives had been trained—with classroom work and on-the-job training. By 1949 the MU had produced many “keen and capable leaders” who, according to the local bishop, “more and more . . . are taking over the work of leadership in the various branches.” Sensing the evangelical value in the work, Africans took the initiative and founded branches autonomously. In many cases, word of the MU’s work preceded it, and it was not just African women who clamored for the same work to be done in their own parishes. Men and elders also saw value in bringing a branch of the MU to their villages to teach the values of Christian motherhood, baby-craft, and domestic sciences as a way to convert more Africans and to spread Christianity in their village. In the Fiwila district of Tanzania, for example, male teachers lobbied the organization for a chapter to be run by their wives. In short order the wives founded two branches in the region. Despite a wellspring of support from men, African women were the primary drivers of MU growth in UMCA dioceses. Women used the MU as a means to introduce Christianity to non-Christian villages. In order to help women raise their children in “a Christian way,” African MU leaders frequently visited young wives and mothers to illustrate ways to bridge the gap between local “heathen” traditions and Christian living. In Kota in the 1950s, for example, older MU members illustrated ways to make a transition from traditional practices to Christian living by illustrating “tribal customs in relation to Christian teaching.” These women instructed newly married couples on a successful Christian marriage and served in an advisory capacity to
help, where they can, a wife who is not agreeing with her husband." MU leaders also brought Christian practices to the childbirth process by participating in the local instructional classes that preceded a woman’s first birth.49

Scholars have argued that organizations such as the MU performed a number of social functions for their members and the people around them. More instrumental interpretations suggest that in a rapidly urbanizing and industrializing context, these organizations gave female migrants in particular an opportunity “to create a new identity by moving away from traditional kinship structure, to organize social security like funeral arrangements and health care and also to find new norms for educating children.”50 Other scholars see widespread female interest in Christian organizations as an issue of social or cultural liberation, an active response to “religious and social change, which Christianity and a new economic order brought about.”51 Southern African women “created a space for themselves within Methodism because they had distinctly different needs than African men. Non-elite women were not concerned with attaining power, but with using it to persevere. Their domestic responsibilities forced them to concentrate on daily survival strategies.”52 More extreme views suggest that these organizations “defined and defended a new Christian morality in an environment which was widely considered to be immoral,” offering a degree of autonomy to women from their “colonial and traditional patriarchal authorities.”53 The movement of women to mission organizations was often “an expression of their refusal to be pawns” in broader social negotiations of their “attempts to resist.”54 When faced with opposition, faithful women in southern Africa “held on to a distinctive and fervent female group solidarity which helped to sustain them in times of personal and community upheaval.”55 And, of course, other strands of scholarship find within the range of priorities and aspirations that drew women to church organizations a distinct desire for spiritual communion. In church organizations, women had an opportunity to elaborate their unique expression of Christianity and to “put their own stamp on Christianity.”56

If attraction to such organizations was not unique, failure and resistance were not either. While African women today constitute the majority of sisters in Congo, in the early decades of the church’s work, missionary efforts to recruit local women were “almost entirely a failed enterprise.” Indeed, a high failure rate was common to orders throughout the continent. While resistance to baptizing daughters in the church and to Christian marriages was strong, the loss of a young woman to religious profession was inconceivable. Many regarded the vow of celibacy to be unnatural and a rejection of social obligations, saw the vow of poverty as unreasonable, and
the “vow of obedience an irreparable loss.” Such ideas were so foreign that in the lower Congo, the mistress of novices struggled “to create equivalent words in Kikongo for celibacy and to state the condition of poverty in a positive sense. In Congo-Brazzaville, stories of family resistance to girls entering the novitiate were ‘folkloriques’ in their prevalence, repetition, and embellishment.”

Frustrated by this repeated cycle of aspiration and failure, arrival and absconding among UMCA postulants, when it came time to provisionally admit postulants Lusi and Thekla to the CSP in 1939, the order’s British sisters and mission administrators changed their tack. The only way the religious life would be possible for Africans, contemporary administrators believed, would be to allow African aspirants to “have their own ménage, entirely on African lines.” Thus instead of adapting CSP to fit the needs of its African aspirants, the UMCA clothed Lusi and Thekla as novices under a new order, the Community of Saint Mary, or in Kiswahili, “Chama cha Mariamu Mtakatifu” (CMM). The community later added to this title “. . . of Nazareth and Calvary,” by which name it is known today. No other attempt was made to incorporate African female adherents into CSP.

An Imperfect Understanding of the Celibate Life?

According to recollections of the administrative staff, the decision to found an order for African postulants was a matter of practicality. “I think it was very much the wish of everyone that African women, when they were found to have vocation to the religious life, might be admitted to CSP itself, but it just did not work,” said the bishop of Zanzibar. And, indeed, before African aspirants were given their own “ménage,” the attrition rate of postulants was near perfect. What was it about the nature of the all-white CSP that turned African women off from professing? And, why did no women commit to the religious life until the African order was formed? Administrators offered several justifications for these high rates, chief among them the “considerable culture shock” women experienced when making a change to eating English food and “sharing her life with three English Novices, and so had many adjustments to make.” Administrators also believed African postulants’ tribal differences rendered them unable to live together—women from the south of Tanzania, for example, were thought to struggle when they moved to a convent in the colder, wetter northwest of the country—a line of thinking that was in direct contradiction to earlier mission rhetoric. Perhaps most important,
however, church administrators also argued that the “religious life is, even now, very imperfectly understood among the Africans.”

The answer is, of course, far more complicated than the explanation provided by CSP, which was that the African novices had an “imperfect” understanding of celibate life. While the reality of convent life might have been different from the initial expectations of some women, it was not as if the UMCA’s African women were completely unfamiliar with the order and its ideals. The CSP was fundamental to the UMCA’s communities both on Zanzibar and on the mainland, and the sisters were highly visible, well-respected figures in the communities where they worked. At one time or another, almost all African adherents would have had contact with the European sisters through their work as teachers in classrooms throughout the dioceses, nurses in dispensaries, “mothers” in orphanages, and ministers to inquirers and parishioners outside of church. Attributing aspirants’ consistent defections to an “imperfect” understanding of the celibate life, as the European sisters did, also underestimates African congregants’ understanding of, and engagement with, long-standing religious and social underpinnings of the mission. Such a perspective also assumes that congregants were unseeing and uncritical bystanders, rather than attentive, engaged, and invested members of their own community who worked actively to maintain moral order and to control its borders.

Indeed, administrators argued that the “chief stumbling block” for African women and their families was “the unmarried state” sisters were expected to maintain. Assuming that congregants simply misunderstood the expectations of celibacy and the religious life also assumes that Africans agreed that celibacy was the single most important definition of a religious life. The idea that the postulants would remain celibate was indeed perplexing to many community members, Christian and non-Christian alike. Children constituted valuable social currency for African women in many societies, making motherhood a highly valued institution. For postulants to intentionally forego the opportunity to pursue biological motherhood was often a sure-fire way to ignite the confusion and ire of family members, friends, community members, and other observers. Yet, there were many reasons to join a religious order and many aspects of life in an order, and postulants may not have seen celibacy as a necessarily defining characteristic of their lives in the religious order. To be sure, marriage in the precolonial African context was a process rather than a moment, something that could be tried and tested before it was accepted. Even after they were brokered, such unions were rarely as permanent as they were considered to be within the Victorian Christian context.
context, and sexual access was negotiated within a range of potentialities, such as we saw in chapter 5. Such testing would not have been understood or permitted, much less articulated as such in the mission records.

Attributing attrition to an “imperfect” understanding of the religious life, particularly as it relates to celibacy, also elides the strong and persistent influence of family, extended kin, and social networks on the girls’ decisions and behavior. Parents, kin, and other community members often felt a great sense of loss when their daughters joined the community. One British missionary explained in 1928, “African fathers and mothers were ready to admire the religious life for Europeans, but to give up their own daughters was a different matter.” Indeed, a daughter’s pledge of religious celibacy forced parents to relinquish, without compensation, certain rights to, and benefits from, their daughters. Indeed, in entering a religious community and taking a vow of celibacy, the young postulant technically forewent marriage and the possibility for biological children. She denied her father the bridewealth payments that might have, in earlier times, compensated for her lost productive and reproductive capacity. A young postulant’s removal to a community would also have denied her lineage the potential for the web of social ties that marriage and heirs might have helped to create, at least in the ways that they had been traditionally imagined. Relinquishing rights-in-person to a daughter not only undermined others’ potential wealth and access to labor, but it also introduced a level of individualism into a complex decision-making process that was intended to guard and protect the health and perpetuity of the lineage. Such a move also shaped the lineage into a new kind of social entity, one in which the desires of an autonomous individual could outweigh the desires of the lineage. In such a situation, individuals and entire families risked severing ties to ancestors and compromised the transmission of knowledge and skills from clan to clan, from generation to generation.

Resistance, meddling, and the pressure of kin, friends, and community members often fueled postulants’ defections. For many, their family’s displeasure was too much to bear and they acquiesced to the harassment leveled against them. For those that remained, the sense of loneliness, guilt, and dislocation did not end once they were behind the convent’s main gates. The choice between family and the convent was often absolute: one African sister explained about her pledge of celibacy, “If you do this thing, you become an enemy to your family.” For novices in Fipa, Tanzania, this trauma of separation and disappointment was a flashpoint that “brought to the forefront a succession of doubts, uncertainties, and resentments
that most students carried with them throughout their training.⁶⁶⁹ These feelings were often exacerbated by an order’s internal dynamics and particularities.

And among the UMCA, the salient internal dynamics were likely those of race and difference, especially for African postulants who were alone among British sisters. Generally less educated than their Mbweni counterparts and even mainland clerics’ wives like those at Saint Cyprian’s, African postulants from rural outstations may not have had a firm command of English or even Kiswahili, or much confidence in communicating as peers with British sisters. Once in the UMCA’s formerly whites-only order, however, the “little sisters” of the CSP like Stella and Esta had to negotiate a hierarchy in which their British “superiors” considered them to be of “backward cultures and . . . low in moral fiber.” This social hierarchy based on race was common when white missions accepted African members. Not long after establishing an order in Congo, for example, female missionaries declared their higher status in a memo that stated, “The native sisters can never be on the same footing as Europeans in regard to clothing, food, and lodging.”⁷⁰ In the Fipa Catholic community, the earliest African sisters were held to a lower standard than their European counterparts. The nascent state of Christianity in the region, officials believed, dictated “a more lenient approach to the vows and lifestyle required of the first African sisters.” They were allowed to “participate in Fipa wedding celebrations and funerals, to drink small amounts of beer, and even to brew beer themselves . . . the first African sisters made promises (ahadi) not vows for fear that the vows would be difficult to keep.”⁷¹ While the UMCA’s commitment to developing a Native Clergy may have assuaged some of the patronizing rhetoric that shaped interactions in the convents cited above, the “little sisters” of the CSP were not on an equal footing with their British counterparts.

Yet, it is important to consider that this internal hierarchy, which formed along the lines of race and an assumption of ranked cultural development, may have been a useful tool for the order’s African postulants. We cannot know the intentions of the “little sisters,” but it is possible they knew of the British officials’ perceptions of them as “backward” and ignorant of the nuances of the celibate life, and used those assumptions to their advantage. Did they cultivate this sense of themselves as unsophisticated participants in the religious life in order to have a way out, and to keep their options open? As we have seen, Africans often considered sexual relationships—which in the context of a religious order would have been defined by a strict lack of sex—to be temporary. They were entered into not with the pretense of exclusivity or permanency, but more often as part of a negotiated social
contract: pawns served as domestic slaves for the length of a loan; women looked to a husband’s brother or cousin to resolve infertility in a marriage; children engaged in sex play until puberty; lovers engaged in extramarital affairs precisely because love and sexual passion were not valued as a solid foundation for marriage. As such, one’s abstinence or one’s lack of sexual engagement—particularly a decision that was freely entered into—likely appeared to postulants and their families as negotiable, flexible, and temporary as any other sexual relationships a woman or her extended family might negotiate.

Thus, did the “little sisters” cultivate or perpetuate a “backward” or unsophisticated demeanor in order to engage with the religious life on their own terms? Did the “little sisters” take advantage of the British officials’ views of them to experiment with celibacy and the religious life, to try it on and to test it out for a period of time, knowing that their “low moral fiber” could serve as an excuse should they decide to call it quits? Or, perhaps the “little sisters” decisions not to join the CSP were a sign of dissatisfaction with the hierarchy itself. Rather than “failing” to fit into their British sisters’ routines and to fully appreciate the demands of the religious life, perhaps they refused to be under the thumb of their white sisters. Perhaps they yearned instead for a separate space, where they could pursue their own vision of a religious life away from British control. It may be that repeated refusals to join the CSP were a method of gaining more control over the ideals of ethnic diversity and racial exclusivity that underwrote the UMCA.

Further, administrators did not consider the possibility that Africans’ dissatisfaction with the life they found in the CSP was the result of their inability to forge the types of affective spiritual relationships with their fellow sisters with congregants that they desired. The racial and power dynamics between African and British novices were not even, and as such the African “little sisters” were not given equal voice in the development of the community. Nor, for that matter, were they encouraged to invest in relationships with their “big sisters” as they might have with African sisters. As such it is possible, as we will see below, to understand the development and founding of the CMM as a new form of subjectivity and organization forged by Africans themselves in an attempt to create a place to pursue on their own terms affective spiritual relationships with fellow sisters, with congregants, and with other community members.
Growth of the Chama cha Mariamu Mtakatifu (CMM)

Settled under a new name, the community grew more quickly in the next several decades. Two additional women, Mariamu and Agnes, both from the Zigua ethnic group, expressed a desire for the religious life and joined the fledgling CMM in 1940. They were made postulants and, concerned as the British staff were with the presumed determinism of one’s tribal background, sent to live in a msonge (noted in the sources as a “round Zigua-type house”) that was built adjacent to the CSP Mother House. There they could live together in a situation the missionaries believed was more appropriately suited to the needs of Africans. By April 1941, Novice Thekla and a new postulant had left the order, and Novice Lusi was sent to join Mariamu and Agnes. Lusi, too, returned home after only a few months. Missionaries chalked Lusi’s departure up to the difficulties she must have experienced as “the only southerner” in a “remote part” of the colony, “as tribal customs, food and housing were all very different.” They recurrent arrivals and departures continued apace, with perhaps two women arriving and two departing per year. By 1946, however, two novices took annual vows at Kwa Mkono, one in the complex of mission villages of which Msalabani, Magila, Maramba, and Kigongoi were also a part; after another four and a half years the same women became the first professed Sisters of CMM. Three more postulants joined Novices Mariamu and Helena to complete the proper founding of the community in 1946. The first three novices made their First Profession on February 18, 1949, at Kwa Mkono, and Sisters May Elizabeth, Jessie, and Fieda all remained with the order to take life vows as sisters on December 30, 1957.

In 1960, aspirants began arriving from southwestern Tanzania to the sisters’ house at Kwa Mkono. Just as in years before, many did not persist, although enough did to enable the community to grow. CMM opened a branch house at Msalabani, on the hill above the village of Magila. Women there and at the mother house at Kwa Mkono taught school, worked as matrons and headmistresses at the girls’ schools, worked as nurses, and were employed in wafer making and bookbinding. When I visited a CMM convent in Dar es Salaam in 2013, the masista told me they were still engaged in many of the same activities. They were proud to be using one of the mission’s first wafer presses, just as they had for nearly a century. The press sits in a small room where orphaned children under the care of the convent, chickens, and dogs run between the nuns’ legs, picking scraps of unleavened bread off of the ground to serve as a toy or snack.
CMM became officially independent of CSP in 1968, at which time Sister May Elizabeth was installed as the first African mother superior of the CMM. In 1974, CMM acquired the last of CSP’s houses, this one in Newala, as the last of the British sisters returned to England. Today, nearly a century after Stella joined the CSP, an entirely separate order of African sisters is flourishing, with 150 women—including postulants and novices—living together in eleven houses in Tanzania and one in Zambia. Attending to their professions of chastity, sacrifice, and submission illustrates that masista pursued alternative paths toward adult womanhood that allowed them a stake in community development and to monitor the boundaries and nature of the community. Attending to emotions and affects such as fear and discontent, striving and aspiration, faith and self-sacrifice, we also see that a religious order has long served as an opportunity for the UMCA’s African women to forge a unique subjectivity.

Once the experiences of African women in the CSP tailored the religious order into something that fit their own needs and demands, they began to realize some of these same benefits that Tractarian women in Victorian Britain had discovered. For example, they derived dignity and independence from the important work and

FIGURE 14. The convent at Msalabani.
responsibilities sisterhoods offered them outside of the home and out from under their fathers’ or brothers’ thumbs. Religious orders offered women a viable and increasingly respected alternative to marriage. They also allowed faithful women to pursue a religious calling not otherwise offered in the church structure. Finally, sisterhoods allowed women to live intimately with other women.

Membership in the CMM also offered women and their families a host of material and instrumental benefits. For many families, the mission offered “an alternative structure for achieving subsistence and, ultimately, the health and longevity of one’s offspring.” Indeed, some women hailed from situations in which the people around them calculated the postulants’ choices in terms of their association with the mission. Parents might have imagined that their daughter’s confession was a way to become more firmly embedded in the local Christian community. The convent and its affiliate institutions—hospitals, schools, and the church at large—constituted a new web of social, economic, and political networks into which the parents of newly professed postulates could tap. The thought of knowing personally a nurse at the local dispensary or hospital, or the headmistress at a girls’ secondary school, probably offered some parents both hope for access and special treatment, and solace in that their daughter’s choice could pay all manner of dividends. In its later iteration as the CMM, the organization prided itself on self-reliance and produced crops and goods for themselves as well as surpluses that they could also sell or give away to those in need—families might have imagined themselves as first in line for these riches, and for the advice and political arbitration that the sisters were known for offering. Although the order would probably protest, Sister Martha provided an interesting response to the question of how her people benefit from her affiliation with CMM when I interviewed her in 2008. When asked if they receive “direct help,” she replied, “Yes. Like giving financial assistance. My salvation is their everything.”

CMM also offered the possibility to forge networks of extended kin, similar to those forged in the context of marriage, that was likely attractive to women and their families. The church, as a theoretical marriage partner, offered families and lineages certain social and economic benefits not available elsewhere. Negotiating a marriage with the mission, as it were, also allowed families to extend their social circle, and to increase the numbers and types of individuals and institutions on which they could rely in tough times. Further, these mission marriages reduced the possibility that a daughter could enter a “bad” marriage. With a mission marriage there was no risk of incurring a son-in-law who would default on his bridewealth
FIGURE 15. CMM sisters in the Refectory at Msalabani.

FIGURE 16. CMM sisters, circa 1957.
payments, or of becoming saddled with in-laws who did not reciprocate in social exchanges. A mission was perhaps a more financially and socially reliable partner for a devout young woman, a partner who would offer a daughter—and, theoretically, her family—access to hugely expanded social networks, a profession, and financial stability. Forging bonds of affective spirituality with a church, or with Jesus himself, rather than with a companionate partner of the opposite sex, also allowed women to negotiate a long-term partnership arrangement that still permitted her to act autonomously as an evangelist within the church.

For the especially devout, a daughter pursuing the religious life might have confirmed her parents’ own investments in their daughter’s spiritual development, affirmed their own social identity as Christians, and perhaps offered family and friends the comfort of knowing they would have a personal intercessor in both church and spiritual affairs. And for some among those, the call of God was not theirs to judge: Sister Jesse’s mother, for example, explained her support by saying, “I am God’s creature. Who am I to resist His will in this matter?” And, according to a mission publication (admittedly prone to the occasional exaggeration), the family of an Islamic convert was similarly swayed by their faith in the religious payoffs of their daughter’s choice. When church officials explained to a father that if his daughter entered the community she could not marry and he would receive no bridewealth, he replied, “When I give my daughter to God, I do not expect any payment for her.”

Decades later, CMM sisters have similar responses. When asked if her family benefits from her affiliation with CMM, Sister Merina responded, “Maybe the way it benefits is through my prayers now. When I pray for them so much and I go home they say ‘now we see we are truly being blessed, even though there was a disturbing issue, it is not there any more, we are therefore thankful for the prayers.’” Sister Ethel added, “I help them through prayer in their endeavors so they can do well and prosper in their life.”

The order offered a host of personal and professional options that were either alternative pathways to opportunities available in their home communities, or were opportunities for advancement within the context of the UMCA community that did not exist at home. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many religious women understood the convent as a place to turn to when faced with limited choices in their community. Marginalized or otherwise disadvantaged women often saw in the convent an opportunity for a lifetime of support; she might envision herself as part of a community and a family, and dream of the opportunities for education and career training. Among aspirants in the 1960s, CSP complained, was the idea that “if
you become a Sister, you will get the chance of an education (and maybe even the training) that your parents had been unable or unwilling to provide.” Education, the sister continued, “is the means of a job and a salary which will then provide for the numerous younger members of the family, so a great many of the aspirants to CMM in those years, arrived less for the sake of the Religious Life, than for the chance of getting an education. One even came under the impression that if she could get as far as training and a salaried job, she would then be allowed to send at least half her salary for the support of her family.” While this may not have been the ideal route to the religious life in the minds of the church administration, it was a viable and productive pathway for postulants and their families.

Religious Celibacy, Adult Womanhood, and Affective Spirituality

Perhaps most significantly, the order offered women an alternative path toward adult womanhood through which novices could shape and control the nature of the burgeoning spiritual community, much the same as their colleagues did when they began radiating out from Mbweni and establishing stations on the mainland. To be sure, in choosing to join the UMCA’s celibate religious order, African female congregants were not deviating fundamentally from African ideals of adult womanhood, which are often described by scholars as bound to the experience of motherhood. Yet, biological motherhood was only one of the possible routes to adulthood in the precolonial period—and not a guaranteed route at that. Indeed, in parts of precolonial Africa, motherhood was both a social institution and an ideology that was not strictly defined by the biological act of reproduction. Scholars have distinguished between what the “social category of mother” and the “biological event of giving birth.” In order to achieve the social status of mother in precolonial North Nyanza, “a woman should do more than conceive and give birth: she should do these in a specified and socially recognized context.” Indeed, female bodies needed to be properly prepared—through circumcision, initiation, or other rites and rituals—to conceive. Girls from central Kenya who gave birth before initiation, for example, were not recognized as either mothers or adult women by the community, but were instead seen as socially dangerous beings with the capacity to cause potentially widespread devastation. Yet, just as biological reproduction was not in itself sufficient for a woman to be a mother, biological reproduction within the context of marriage was only the most common, not the only, route into
the social category of mother—and adult womanhood. In other words, for those for whom biological motherhood or marriage was neither possible nor desirable, there existed alternative pathways to achieve the status of social motherhood, and of socially recognized adult womanhood. Religious specialists, for example, gained “status, respect, social and economic security in precolonial society because they provided necessary and important services.” In addition to adoption and fostering, North Nyanzan women in a childless marriage in the precolonial period could take advantage of the social institution of *perekezi*. After accompanying a bride to her new home, the *perekezi* could stay with the new wife for a prolonged period and, should she become pregnant by the husband, would become one of his wives. Because of her relationship with the *perekezi*, the wife could lay some claim to her *perekezi’s* children if she did not conceive.

By electing to pursue profession and participation in CMM, African congregants were creating yet another new pathway toward adult womanhood, one that was imminently suited to the new status hierarchies and opportunities of a rapidly changing Tanganyika. In so doing, unmarried and childless female African congregants were drawing both on older African practices and on newer Victorian institutions, crafting socially acceptable ways to participate in the UMCA and in the world around them as adult women. As a result, they were able to form intimate relationships of affective spirituality with individuals around them. These relationships resembled in many ways, but were not exactly like, those forged through the institution of biological motherhood. Through these relationships, they were able to act as evangelists—just like their lay counterparts. Quotidian performance of the mission’s civilizational values and relationships of affective spirituality allowed celibate women to participate in the social reproduction of the UMCA community and its values.

One sister with whom I spoke in 2013 was keenly aware of her and her colleagues’ evangelical power, and of the power of the relationships she forged to serve as a foundation for proselytization and community expansion. She said, “When a teacher teaches in various schools, a student might imitate her behavior. The students might be pleased with the behavior of a sister and take it so that in future it is easy to see the student has this habit. This brings a true blessing . . . that the transformation is done in faith.” In this way, the celibacy of the masista was both productive and reproductive.

The procreative power of celibacy is evidenced by a quote from another elderly sister I spoke with in 2012. She spoke to me in particular about her work with
orphaned children, and her role in their spiritual development. Her affective and spiritual relationship with an individual orphan, she argued, was fundamental to building the child’s relationship with the church. She said,

In my work you can pray, but you can [also] be moved to go and help orphaned children somewhere, they are going through this and this . . . On reaching there you find you get deeply moved and hurt because you see things are not right and you get concerned about how you must do something. That is why I say we don’t pray so that God descends with answers, oh no, God passes through people with the ability, even in Tanzania. In this world . . . there are people of different abilities. When you pray God touches a particular servant to go and help in a certain place, that is why we live.89

Masista live, she continued, “to create awareness through evangelism on how to pray for people or educate people on how to live and free themselves from poverty.” Indeed, the bonds of motherhood allow masista to build a community of believers. “The children I see out there,” one sister told me during the same visit in 2012, “I take them as mine and I am obligated to tend for people's children. They are not mine, but I do it very well.”90

The careers of contemporary CMM masista and their work in the community also suggest that they understand themselves as “spiritual mothers,” engaged in relationships of affective spirituality with community members and others around them. Teaching and nursing were the most common career choices for masista, just as they have long been for their noncelibate contemporaries. More utilitarian pursuits—such as wafer making and bookbinding, handiwork and cookery—allow them to tend to the needs of a broader population. Says one sister, “We bring people to God by our work, running groups of women and girls, teaching housecraft-domestic science . . . We try to work hard so that we be able to be self-reliant—we do handwork, agriculture, poultry, piggery and we have a few cows, and goats and fish ponds. We support the church by making vestments and wafer making.”90 Indeed, the convent at Masasi seemed to epitomize self-reliance—an impressive bio-gas operation fueled the entire convent and some of the surrounding area with electricity, and their human power produces sesame oil and other garden products for sale. At the CMM convent in Masasi, for example, masista are focused in large part on serving the needs of local women, framed as “poorest of the poor.” Masista at Masasi run a chapter of the Guild of Saint Agnes,
an organization for schoolgirls that “helps Christian girls to love God and live pure lives until marriage.” They also work with female school-leavers so that they may return and finish, at least through Standard VII; they articulated plans to build an orphanage for young girls on their property “so that we can help some of them
in education and bring up that they can grow up well and with faith and be good people in family and the community.”

Indeed, the intimate, affective spiritual relationships between CMM masista and their congregants were unequivocal, to their eyes and in the eyes of the community. When asked by my research assistant in 2008 if she ever felt like having children or wished she had, one sister replied with a dismissive “I have spiritual children.” Masista “don’t have kids or husbands; our husband is Jesus Christ,” said another. “We were called to serve others and pray for those who need our prayers,” she continued. Mothers, another nun argued, run the risk of great emotional burdens: “Married people lose their children . . . and others give birth without plan.” In a poignant tribute to the number of HIV orphans in contemporary Tanzania, she continued, “Better the womb which does not conceive than children bringing you hopeless grandchildren as they die.”

Yet, masista and their congregants also engaged in relationships of affective spirituality that were collective, aimed at the broader community. African Catholic sisters in Congo explained their motive for becoming members of the religious congregation in terms of a maternity that makes them “mothers for all the people.” Their choice is presented as more of an “affirmation than a denial of the basic matrifocal Congo valuation of women in terms of motherhood.” Congo sisters were women who “themselves have come to see their chosen life as a kind of ‘alternative motherhood’ for the whole of the society; they explain their celibacy not so much as a relinquishing of physical maternity for their own clan (mama mitu), but much more as a call to nurture and foster life for all in an unbounded, universal maternity (mama moyo).” And indeed, although CMM masista did not reproduce the church community through biological reproduction, they centered the nation-state as the recipient of their pedagogical, emotional, and spiritual labors. Explained one CMM sister, “When we are praying we don’t select a certain group of people to pray for but rather we pray for the entire Tanzanian community.” They offer advice and counsel, and do so without discrimination, another told me: “People depend on the CMM, [because] they offer help with problems and counseling. It doesn’t matter if they are Muslim or Christian.”

Finally, the relationships of affective spirituality masista forged with the outside community would not have been possible without strong relationships inside the community itself. I argue it was a combination of subjects’ desire for a female group solidarity and a distinct desire for spiritual communion, such as we saw above, that binds CMM masista together. Earlier, we saw that the ability to live openly and
intimately with other women heightened the allure of religious sisterhoods for British Tractarian women. At Clewer, the institution that provided much of the training of the UMCA's British sisters held intimacies or “particular friendships” between its members to be not only a positive force in the community but also integral to the mission of the community. Sisters who found themselves in this position were encouraged only to strive to love God more. While I do not wish to speculate on the existence or nature of intimate, same-sex relationships between the CMM's members, the point is that the range of intimacies—from friendships, to sisterhoods, to ties that resemble those between a mother and a daughter, and even to romantic relationships—can be seen to be a unifying force within the community.

Modern-day masista have intimate ties of affective spirituality between them. One nun characterized the nature of the relationships among sisters of different generations as resembling that of biological mothers and daughters. When asked if she regretted passing up the opportunity to have children, one sister replied: “I can’t say. I have young nuns who handle me like their mother. I am already a mother and I don’t think I miss it.” Such connections were the bonds that held the community together. As Sister Angela told me in 2008, “Groups are helpful in church because if you do not belong to a certain group it becomes hard to receive help in times of trouble, but if you belong to one, you are helped without a problem.” Another sister wrote about a “shared prayer” group, likely reminiscent of the prayers embraced by members of the Guild of the Good Shepherd or the Guild of All Saints, in which they focused on the work of the Holy Spirit. The women were “gradually growing into it, and we certainly feel drawn together by the experience, and hope it will develop into something deeply spiritual.”

Ultimately, masista amplified and expanded upon the multigenerational network that clerics’ wives and teachers, daughters and protégées, Mbweni’s young lovers and their elders, and other sisters in spirit helped to create. They can be thought of as parallel, and at times overlapping, with the movements of the UMCA’s other sisters in spirit. The innermost ring of what can be thought of as concentric circles is the masista themselves, and the relationships of affective spirituality their lives together forged. A larger ring consists of masista moving out into the community, working with students, congregants, and inquirers, in the ways described above. One sister explained in 2008 that, just like priests and clerics’ wives, nuns “also visit patients or older people as well as visiting children in Sunday schools to teach them.” This expansion, as we have seen above, was vital to evangelism and the growth of the community.
Masista who moved from their homes to new regions of the country to join the convent also tied disparate and discontiguous stations together, just as the sisters in spirit who preceded them did for nearly a century. Physically, their travel from home to their convent, and back for holidays and vacations, tied the community together. And, just as their colleague sisters in spirit had done, several of the first generation of CMM masista traveled to England for study and to help forge relationships with their transnational communion. In what appears to have been the mid-1960s, Sisters May Elizabeth and Jessie went to England for three months. They spent much of their time at the CSP convent in East Hanningfield, and traveled to other religious communities in Britain. Perhaps they also visited with the CSP companion sisters we met earlier in this chapter. Sisters Magdalen and Naomi followed not long after, having been accepted into a domestic science course at Seaford College of Education. Upon their return, each took up a headmistress position in Tanzania’s freshly nationalized schools. And today, just as their predecessors had done nearly a century before, modern-day masista relish in the movement that their positions permit them. Several women told me that their lives as masista allowed them to travel the country, and in fact the world, in ways they never would have imagined possible. Sister Ethel, for example, explained the ways in which the religious life offered her opportunities to evangelize: “I can tour and go from province to province, or I can shift from here to Njombe; after Njombe maybe I can go somewhere else. If I could be outside this place [not a CMM member] maybe I could not be able to reach, say Mtwara, Musasi, name it. So I go to all this places but it is because I am in this lifestyle and I am acquainted to many different people and the like. Maybe I couldn’t have met such people if I could be in the outside life but here I am able to meet them, I speak to different people.”\textsuperscript{102} The networks that they forged reinforced and added to the existing connections, strengthening the foundation of the community and extending its spiritual ties.

But it was the prayers of the masista that held the community together spiritually. Nuns speak of the power of prayer to change the lives of those around them, and far away at home. Several nuns spoke of this power as a privilege and responsibility: “I get the chance to uplift my younger [family members] and others. Creating salvation in others; it teaches how to love . . . I could not have achieved these when I was outside [the community]. My family would not be stable like now.”\textsuperscript{103} Sister Lucy argued that her life in the convent and her position in the church offered her family “advice and the blessings,” and Sister Mariam explained that “the responsibility of the celibates is to pray for the people of the world.” It is “the main responsibility”
of a celibate, she continued, “to pray for the people of the world. The way many deaths occur, a lot of chaos, vehicles on roads—we need to pray for the travelers to reach their homes, to escort their goods where they are going in the morning. When there is an accident you need to be keen when saying the place and confess it is because of us or because of me that this happened. When sickness breaks out, families become sick in many places it is my time to ask God and pray so that these things don’t happen. That is the main work of a celibate to do.”

While British church administrators initially heralded the establishment of a separate community for African aspirants, later generations of church officials came to regret this decision. In 1959, for example, at a moment when the colony was transitioning to self-rule, development, and “nonracial” politics, some among a new generation of missionaries questioned their predecessors’ decision to form a separate African spiritual order. In a letter to his then-bishop, the UMCA’s general secretary wrote:

Some of us have always wished that African women, when they were found to have a vocation to the Religious Life, might have been admitted to CSP itself . . . On the face of it, to have separate communities is a species of colour discrimination, and would seem to militate against the unity of the church and of Christian life in Christ. Is it fantastic to suggest that eventually a community with its Mother House in Africa should have an African Mother Superior? I have a feeling that Frank Weston himself would have rejoiced at the idea.

Other missionaries saw the continued separation between the CMM and the CSP as a manifestation of a much more serious problem within the UMCA, which was the mission’s failure to keep up with a rapidly changing Tanganyika. “Bluntly,” an anonymous former Newala District officer wrote in a letter to his friend Sister Magdalene, the UMCA “is falling behind its environment.” The “UMCA is still working on the assumption that Africans are unable to take over their own affairs for a long time yet, and still need a very permanent guiding hand on top,” he lectured. But things were “moving so fast, that these assumptions—as assumptions, are unrealistic.” The former district officer concluded, “Anyway, however much those inside may be unable to comprehend, from outside people think CSP/CMM is an example of colour-bar, and in a place like Tanganyika in 1960 this is dynamite.”
Indeed, for a mission trying to stay relevant in a rapidly changing Tanganyika, it was imperative to embrace the rhetoric of “multiracialism,” or even “nonracialism,” that the pragmatic Nyerere espoused. Church officials lamented their predecessors’ inability to successfully integrate the spiritual order, and they were also profoundly embarrassed by the continued racial segregation within the church. Indeed, the mission’s general secretary summed up the widespread feeling when he wrote, “Some of us have always wished that African women, when they were found to have a vocation to the Religious Life, might have been admitted to CSP itself.”

The establishment of separate religious orders within the UMCA—one for British sisters and one for their African counterparts—was not an instance of UMCA officials blindly applying a policy derived from the ideal of the “Native Church” to the African aspirants. Rather, the development of the CMM as a racially segregated order was the result of African congregants’ initiatives to engage more fully in shaping the nature of the UMCA community and its rhetoric. In particular, African congregants’ pursuits of the religious life were the result of a reformulation of longer-standing African institutions that permitted multiple pathways to adult womanhood, and a translation of the Victorian Tractarian ideal of the sisterhood into terms that were useful for them. Female congregants’ attempts to join the CSP were ultimately a strategy to assert more control over the rhetoric of pan-ethnic unity, Christian modernity, and in particular racial exclusivity, as full adult members of the church community. Also, the UMCA’s African sisters oriented their pedagogical, spiritual, and emotional attentions toward new and emerging, explicitly political, communities. Indeed, CMM masista, steeped in the values of Christian modernity, supra-ethnic unity, and racial exclusivity began to engage with new discourses and ways of thinking about and categorizing the world that emerged in the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s. In particular, masista were faced with new modes of racial thought, with international discourses, such as Pan-Africanism and anticolonial nationalism, and with the increased politicization of African civil service and labor organizations. In looking to make sense of these new ideas and to reconcile the shifting political landscape, masista applied inherited values to new circumstances. Far from “retired” from the world, the UMCA’s masista embodied and performed the UMCA’s rhetoric of Christian modernity, supra-ethnic unity, and racial exclusivity in churches, in schools, in hospitals, and in local communities.