

Botswana
 Cameroon
 Canada
 the Democratic Republic
 of Congo
 Eritrea

Women Theologians

BY MARGARET A. FARLEY AND JAMIE L. MANSON '02

countries represented

Ghana
 Kenya
 Mozambique
 Namibia
 Rwanda
 South Africa
 Uganda
 United States
 Zambia

Fifty women from fourteen countries and diverse faith traditions gathered this February at the Divinity School to address the AIDS pandemic in Africa. **Twenty-three of the participants were African women theologians or church workers from twelve African nations.** The African women joined with women theologians from the United States and Canada in order to probe the connections between gender and faith in an attempt to find new responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa and around the world. **The conference participants represented multiple strands within Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish traditions.**

The work of the conference began with the shared conviction that religious traditions and their institutions can exert a major influence on the spread or prevention of the AIDS pandemic. "Faith communities are either part of the problem or part of the remedy," said Margaret Farley, Gilbert Stark Professor of Christian Ethics at the Yale Divinity School and director of the conference. This was a women's conference in recognition of the fact that as AIDS continues to burn its way across Africa, women are at increasing and disproportionate risk of infection and death. They are also increasingly at the center of community, district, and national responses.

worldwide AIDS epidemic. He also answered questions from the African women participants about the problems and possibilities of working with faith traditions. Elsie Cofield, founder and director of AIDS Interfaith Network in New Haven, shared her experience over decades of working on the local and national front in response to AIDS. During her welcome at this session, Rebecca Chopp, then Dean of Yale Divinity School, remarked, "This conference is already one of the most important events that this Divinity School has had the opportunity to be present to and to host in many years."

While the conference was an invitational working conference, it included a session open to the public on Saturday morning. This session provided a wider discussion of issues with various representatives of local HIV/AIDS organizations and the medical professions. Among these participants, Dean Michael Merson of Yale's Department of Epidemiology and Public Health spoke of the work that is being done at Yale in response to the

The idea for the consultation emerged out of a White House summit held during the weekend of World AIDS Day 2000. The Summit conference called together religious leaders from nations facing massive increases in the spread of HIV/AIDS, particularly African nations. Among those invited to address the participants at the Summit was Margaret Farley, who challenged the religious leaders to address questions of sexuality, the status of women, and poverty in relation to HIV/AIDS.

Elizabeth Huth of the Futures Group International registers Bibi Dhansay, a Muslim participant from Capetown, South Africa.



LUCIA DURA KEATING (ALL)



Respond to HIV/AIDS

Weeks after her address, Professor Farley was contacted by Jason Heffner, an agent from the USAID Africa bureau and one of the organizers of the White House Summit. Mr. Heffner and Professor Farley discussed the possibility of coordinating a conference that would focus on the intersections of gender, faith, and HIV/AIDS in Africa. The conference would link women theologians and care-givers in Africa with women faculty and students of the Yale Divinity School who are committed to addressing these concerns. Farley explained, “We wanted to act on the conviction that both religious traditions and the voices of women are important to the conversation about the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Our hope is that through this consultation we will begin to transform religious traditions so that they will be part of the solution and not part of the problem.”

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Margaret Farley, Gilbert Stark
Professor of Christian Ethics

USAID continued to recognize the importance of faith traditions in this regard, so that it began to collaborate with women faculty of Yale Divinity School. With strong support from Professor Letty M. Russell, the “Project on Gender, Faith, and Responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa” emerged from

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Participants from Zambia, South Africa, and Kenya attended numerous presentations as part of the consultation.

Letty M. Russell, Professor of Theology Emeritus, chairs a small group session with Margaret Mary Shintango, a Dominican nun, and Jane Splawn '04.

Alice Yafeh '02 and Evelyn Wakhusama '02, African YDS students, assisted in the development and coordination of the consultation.

hiv/aids in africa conference



The women at the conference spoke of the need to critique, retrieve, and transform some aspects of religious traditions, resisting distortions and inadequacies that contribute to sickness and death.

Discussion of major theological understandings surrounding sexuality, power, gender relations, and conflict combined with concrete ethical concerns such as the availability and acceptability of condoms. The participants also addressed issues of social justice in international access to medical care.

Musimbi Kanyoro, General Secretary of the World YWCA, said on behalf of the African women participants, “[We are] women speaking authoritatively as leaders in our communities with responsibilities covering local, regional, and international spheres. We represent professions and institutions, movements, or individual initiatives. We are theologians by training and theologians by faith and practice. This is a table rich in variety, for Africa is big and the U.S. is big, and women always have a big agenda.”



LUCIA DURAK KEATING (ALL)

Professor Yolanda Smith, Brigette Symalewwe of Zambia, and Tinsay Woreta, student at the University of Maryland, participate in a working group discussion.

Mercy Oduyoye of Ghana was among the distinguished African theologians present at the consultation.

the initial conversation between Professor Farley and Mr. Heffner. Four additional YDS women faculty members, Dean Rebecca Chopp, Serene Jones, Kristen Leslie, and Yolanda Smith, pooled together time, energy, and resources to assist with the coordination of the consultation, which became the first major result of the work of this Project.

Participants in the consultation noted that the beliefs and practices of many religious institutions often contribute to women’s risk of infection. Religious attitudes and beliefs can present obstacles to women’s effective action in their own communities. They can also serve to silence the voices of women in response. Historical interpretations of faith traditions embedded in culture and controlled by sometimes unwise religious leaders can become distortions of faith. They can thereby promote harm rather than good. On the other hand, the women noted, religious institutions and their faith practices often also inform, inspire, and sustain women as leaders, theologians, policy makers, clinicians, and care-givers.

Participants spent the final sessions of the conference determining how to sustain the theological and practical work they had begun. A major goal of the conference was to find ways to support and sustain African women in their own contexts. Plans have been laid for continued collaboration at a future conference to be sponsored in Ghana by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. This past August four women from the YDS Coordinating Committee, Letty Russell, Shannon Clarkson, Yolanda Smith, and Margaret Farley, traveled to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, at the invitation of The Circle. This conference offered the opportunity for these women to be reunited with many of the African women who traveled to YDS this winter and to continue the work of shared research, strategies, and resources.

Reflecting on the energy of the consultation, Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro said, “The collective power of women has the possibility to reach out and touch the lives of those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. We do not accept that HIV/AIDS is our fate.” ♦

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Musimbi Kanyoro, General Secretary of the World YWCA

Spotlight on Professor Margaret Farley

BY JAMIE L. MANSON '02

Although she has always considered herself a generalist in the field of ethics, Margaret Farley, Gilbert Stark Professor of Christian Ethics at Yale Divinity School, frequently finds the questions of medical ethics taking most of her time. Her pursuit of these questions is as various as the disciplines involved in ethical inquiry.

Through her involvement in the “Project on Gender, Faith, and Responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa,” as well as her work on the ethics committees for the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, Yale-New Haven Hospital and Leeway (a hospice for HIV/AIDS patients), Professor Farley encounters both the academic dilemmas and the human face of issues in medical ethics.

Amid all of these other undertakings, perhaps Professor Farley’s most significant commitment to the questions of medical ethics is evidenced in her position as co-chairperson of the Yale University Interdisciplinary Bioethics Project, a post she shares with Robert J. Levine, M.D. The Project, which was initiated in 1997, was designed to coordinate interdisciplinary research and discussion among all of the professional schools at Yale as well as departments in the natural and social sciences, philosophy, religious studies and the humanities. Yet, Professor Farley explains, the goal of the project is not limited to the University, “The aims of the Project also reach beyond Yale to the general development of the discipline of bioethics and to addressing bioethical questions of urgent importance to all humankind.”

Professor Farley and her colleagues on the Executive Committee of the Bioethics Project operate on the conviction that Yale’s diversity of schools and departments and its history of work in issues of bioethics makes the University distinctive in its capacity for interdisciplinary study.

In addition to the Project’s broad engagement in bio-medical topics, the interdisciplinary nature of the Project also attracted Professor Farley, who was doctoral student of Professor James Gustafson, one of the most important interdisciplinary thinkers in religious studies in the past century.



GABRIEL A. COONEY

Reflecting on her work with Professor Gustafson, Professor Farley recalled, “Issues in medical ethics moved on the horizon in the late 1960s and early 1970s when I was a Ph.D. student in religious ethics at Yale.” Topics such as informed consent, research ethics, and genetics gradually captured the attention of the general public as well as medical and legal professionals and ethicists. She explains, “Religious traditions, especially those that sponsor health care institutions, struggled to respond to new ethical questions with integrity. The women’s movement raised many medical issues particular to women and children. It was almost impossible for me, as a woman in ethics, not to become involved with biomedical issues.”

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Professor Farley’s interest in the interdisciplinary study of ethics is reflected in the classes that she offers to students at Yale. Her lecture courses on the History of Christian Theological Ethics and Medical Ethics continue to influence and inspire students of ethics after nearly three decades, while her more specialized seminars in the Relationship Between Morality and the Spiritual Life and Environmental Ethics (both of which she is teaching this year) allow students to cross diverse disciplines in their reading and classroom discussions.

With so many important commitments both to her students at Yale and to these larger global concerns, Professor Farley’s free time is all too precious. When some spare time does become available, though, she continues her work on two manuscripts-in-progress, one on sexual ethics and the other on freedom and action. ♦

Margaret A. Farley
Gilbert L. Stark Professor of Christian Ethics

EDUCATION

1957 A.B., University of Detroit
1960 M.A., University of Detroit
1970 M.PHIL., Yale University
1973 PH.D., Yale University



LUCÍA DURÁ KEATING

Professor Farley and Warren Buckingham of USAID in a small group discussion.