

# A *Kapwa* Church: Dwelling Together in the Gap Reflections in the Pandemic

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We live in an unprecedented and unpredictable time. Little did we know that the pandemic crisis will bring us to an extended and seemingly endless time of waiting. As front liners battle to save lives and scientists work for a vaccine, the whole world is being reshaped. We are brought in a gap that redefines us as people and as a church.



For us Filipinos, to be at the gap together is to be a *ka-puwang*. *Ka-puwang* is the root word of *kapwa*, a core Filipino value. Though it loosely translates as the other, *kapwa* means a shared identity with the other. Being at the gap conveys this shared self powerfully. At the *puwang*, we become.

## ***Puwang* and Liminality**

*Puwang* is a liminal space, a threshold characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty, where each one is “betwixt and in between.” To be in a liminal space can be likened to an experience of death or of being in the womb since it is a time of waiting.

Life takes us all at the *puwang*. Individuals go through liminality when they pass from one status to another. From being an adolescent to becoming an adult. When one joins a new company or transfer to a new place. During important moments of transition like marriage and retirement, status, role, and responsibilities seem unclear as one is both on two sides and in the in-between.

Societies undergo such liminality in pivotal moments in history. The long years of colonization take people between what was life was before and what can still be. The Israelites’ long journey to the Promised Land, their experience in the wilderness, and the many years of exile were crucial in defining them as a people and helping them understand who God is for them.

Disaster and trauma theories speak about the *puwang* as a space for passive and active resistance. During the first weeks of the pandemic, the heroism of front liners and the sense of community kept people’s hopes high. It united us to work together and ‘heal as one.’ But as the numbers continued to soar and as needs became more complex, disillusionment and abandonment begin to creep in. We reach a stage where we realize that the situation is far more complex than we have imagined.

In the liminal phase, identities are suspended and recreated. What was considered normal ways of reacting or responding to situations may not be applicable and thus, there is a need to withdraw from regular habits and practices and even a time of complete letting go. Old structures are reassessed and reshaped to respond to the needs while new structures and perspectives emerge. As it is a stage of uncertainty, the *puwang* is also a space for creativity. While many setbacks point to the experience of death and nothingness, there is a new spirit that is borne at the gap.

## Church and the New Normal



Screen shot of Ka-Puwang Webinar Session

In a series of *Bukal ng Tipan* online exchanges entitled *Ka-Puwang: Dwelling at the Gap*, church workers, priests, and laypeople, were given the space to share their experience of a church at the gap and discern on the questions that remain amid the crisis. Their experiences highlighted the death and life experience of individuals and communities at the “in-between.” *Below are the summary reflections after the four Bukal online exchanges (please visit Bukal Kapuwang FB page for the actual four sessions <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2519618424964692/> ).*

### Deconstructing Identities and Roles

At the *puwang*, the clergy are challenged to redefine their roles. Some priests feel disoriented and disillusioned, as the “cultic priesthood” is deconstructed because of online masses, and as “liturgical fixation” gave way to “liturgical innovation and creative inculturation” to adapt to the changing needs. Amid the pastoral challenges that called for an immediate response, those who are compromised because of their age and medical condition are forced to withdraw while the younger ones are called to take over tasks they were not trained to handle.

The gap led people back to the essential connection of family and community. Family as the domestic church became more manifest as it became the only space for worship and prayer. In some communities that have liturgical guides for their chapel gatherings, fathers and mothers took the initiative to do the same gathering in their homes.

Similarly, the call for the interconnectedness of church and government to respond to essentials became more evident. Amid the fight for survival and the threats to life, the poor who are most vulnerable became agents-subjects for their development. Volunteering to guard their communities during the lockdown, distributing food packs, as well as taking care of their elderly neighbor’s needs, they discover that they can rely on each other. They initiate collaborative endeavors with government agencies and non-government organizations to respond to the basic needs of families and the entire community.

### Life as the Context (and Content) of Formation

As the cyberspace became the main platform for providing faith formation, it has its pros and cons that warrant church discernment. While it offers a borderless space of endless possibilities in content and reach, people at the end of the day see the big lack of physical connection and interaction that is so essential in nurturing and sharing the faith. On the other hand, people with similar interests and needs can create community and develop new online strategies to minister to one another and build community.

Seminary formation had to redesign their programs to allow seminarians to have their classes and even their apostolates online. As physical distancing is the norm to be followed even within the community, the setting of the home is rediscovered as an essential place of formation for them.

As the fight for survival and limit questions take a forefront in the pandemic crisis, faith formation ought to be “essential, engaging, and dynamic.” Life is not just the starting point but is the very context and content of formation. Like the story of the Emmaus, to be at the *puwang* is to find Jesus in one another, by sharing one’s frustrations and questions, by an openness to be enlightened by Jesus through his life and example, and by being together every step of the way.

### **Needs Shaping New Ministries**

The *puwang* has brought out countless needs from the economic to the psycho-spiritual concerns of families and communities. Innovative strategies like urban farming and home-based enterprises developed. Some neighborhoods enjoyed a sense of community on social media through group chats and other online platforms that do not only serve as a space to inform them of covid updates but also to respond to the need for transport, food, and other services. The lockdown in homes exposed the abuses to children and youth within their families and in the virtual world that online strategies to listen to their stories and organize rescue are employed by some agencies.



*FUrban farming from Payatas community*

These experiences highlight popular ministry; one that challenges a church on “maintenance mode,” and pushes for one that takes the “smell of the sheep.” At the *puwang*, needs cannot be addressed without people’s participation. Dialogue is crucial at every step, engaging people through “reciprocal communication and collaboration through an attitude of respect.” At the *puwang*, ministry becomes a space to “discover new charisms,” to embody “*damayan* from the heart,” to journey together towards fullness of life.

### **Towards A *Kapwa* Church**

A church at the *puwang* conveys Pope Francis’ church metaphor of a field hospital -which are small mobile units or ambulances established near the battlefield to respond to the needs of soldiers since the large mobile hospitals could not attend to the surgical needs and immediate care of those on the front line. The field hospital conveys dreadful and horrific images of the war. Soldiers heavily wounded, bodies hit by multiple bullets, limbs that are torn; such graphic suffering in this place may be enough for witnesses to give in or give up. Yet doctors, surgeons, and nurses in field hospitals would fearlessly face their task of saving lives. Such a metaphor speaks powerfully about the church’s role to minister to the sick and the infirmed. Memoirs of field hospitals reveal practices that may not be according to medical standards but are done so to respond to the greater need to preserve life. Ordinary doctors or medical students were given the rank of a surgeon in field hospitals. Assistant surgeons are brought side by side with comrades to apply first aid right on the battlefield. Supplies were transported through the trains and as wounded bodies had to be transported through ships, ships were also organized into wards.

Like a field hospital, a church amid the pandemic crisis is a church in the battlefield. It suggests a community up in arms for those wounded; even if they are hurt and in pain. It implies the courage to face the woundedness of one another and the patience to witness to the suffering that remains until healing and transformation are possible. A church at the *puwang* calls for a *kapwa* church sharing identity with the other, creating a new story and vision together.

### ***Kapwa Tagapakinig: Church as Listening***

A *kapwa* church listens more than hears the needs and cries of people. To listen is to take people's stories and life experiences as new and unique as if it is happening for the very first time. As all our stories are interconnected, a church that listens to people's stories understands that every story speaks to the church's role in the suffering and trauma.

A *kapwa* church listens to the silence, extending the virtue of *pakikiramdam* (shared inner perception) to stories that are not voiced out which brings one to the heart of suffering. A *kapwa* church does not take over the story by taking what one does in the process of listening as more essential than the story itself.

Being a listener in the "in-between" calls us for a listening that does not blame or judge. It is feeling with the "pain of loss as well as the strength of survival." It is challenging us to go beyond ourselves to let the voice of suffering be heard. It is in this way that *ecclesia docens* (a teaching church) can transform into *ecclesia discens* (a learning church).

### ***Kasama sa Puwang: Church as Margin-Dwelling***

A *kapwa* church embraces ambiguity where "human logic is suspended." Perhaps this inadequacy of logic can also be expressed when doctrines or prescribed practices are temporarily held for the greater purpose of saving lives. In normal circumstances, it is easy to reconstruct Christian life from within. New liturgies can be developed following set rubrics or faith formation can employ different strategies to effectively engage people. But to be margin-dwelling is to take the courage to be questioned and to take a step back to be taught.

To be margin-dwelling is to both at the site of the "in-between." To embrace both faith and doubt, belonging and nonbelonging, fear and hope. It is in this space of sensing and groping that the church can reinvent itself.



*Fr. Eduardo Vasquez wears PPE as he administers the Sacrament of Baptism in a visit to one of the families. April 22, 2020. REUTERS/Eloisa Lopez*

### ***Saksi sa Dilim: Church as Witness to the Depths***

A *kapwa* church witnesses to the depths as it sees the *puwang* as a re-creative state.

The Spirit as breath translated in Hebrew as *ruach* is feminine. This evokes the "imagery of childbirth," of a God who "pants with creation to bring about something new." On the other hand, *pneuma*, which is the Spirit translated in Greek is masculine. It takes flesh in the person of Jesus who lived the Spirit by preaching about the kingdom, healing the sick, and even after his death, by gifting the Spirit to his disciples so that they can continue his mission.

Recreating is both feminine and masculine. A church that recreates itself is open to collaborative pursuits. It is through a spirit of interdependence and relationality that new meanings take place and new beginnings happen not only for the individual but for all. It provides a birthing not only of new ideas but new ways of doing and being.

In the Filipino culture, the Spirit is communal energy that is harnessed in the most trying times. The theology of remaining manifested in embracing survivors with all their wounds remaining enables the Spirit to recreate them anew; the image of the *ruach* and the *pneuma* together, which is the oneness and unity of *lakas* (power) and *ganda* (goodness, beauty).

A *kapwa* church facilitates stories of suffering to enable communities to acquire “cultural energy,” that equips them with a “collective agency” and a “collective capacity” at the *puwang*. It is in such a collective process of witnessing to the depths that the church participates in the healing and transformation and as in the discerning how the experience at the *puwang* is redefining our way of being a church in the world.

### **Conclusion**

The church in the pandemic crisis is a church in the battlefield; between death and life, fear and courage, doubt and faith. In the gap, we become a church of prophetic participation. It is a *kapwa* church that is one with the “others,” that witnesses to the depths of their pain and suffering and that is open to be taught and renewed.