

# THE PANDEMIC PUWANG: RESHAPING CHURCH IN THE NEW NORMAL

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*The pandemic crisis is a liminal space and time that redefines the world. In the Filipino language, a liminal space or time is called puwang. As individuals and communities discover new ways and create pathways to live life in the new normal, ecclesial life is no exemption. From faith and ministry stories in the midst of the pandemic, the paper explores how the puwang facilitates people's participation in building church and society. Facing the ongoing challenges together, it reshapes a church that is ka-puwang (companion at the gap) through listening, margin-dwelling, and witnessing to the depths.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is 2021, and we continue to dwell together in this pandemic pause, in an undeniably unprecedented gap.<sup>1</sup> As of the time of writing, more than 200M Covid-19 cases and a staggering 4.258M deaths have been reported worldwide.<sup>2</sup> More deadly variants of the Covid-19 virus continue to emerge, threatening even those who have been vaccinated and causing further extension of pandemic quarantine and protocol to curb its transmission.<sup>3</sup> While

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<sup>1</sup> Online surfing of the “pandemic as unprecedented” has yielded 920,000,000 results with various sources. Using the word ‘unprecedented’ in describing the pandemic crisis – as a worldwide phenomenon that has disrupted all sectors of society, in its impact in public health, economy, education, and in the advances in science and technology, and the quality of collaboration and networking achieved both locally and internationally.

<sup>2</sup> Worldometer, *Covid Live Updates*, accessed August 4, 2021, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Bollinger and Stuart Ray, “New Variants of Coronavirus: What You Should Know,” *John Hopkins Medicine*, accessed July 6, 2021, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/a-new-strain-of-coronavirus-what-you-should-know>.

the public health sector battles to save lives and to protect people from being infected, it has also caused a huge loss on the economy as businesses close down<sup>4</sup> and more people suffer from unemployment.<sup>5</sup> The mental health cases globally have risen exponentially as fear, depression, and anxiety grip the hearts of people of whatever economic status and social background.<sup>6</sup> Though vaccines have been recently made available, analysts assert that it is not possible to achieve herd immunity in the next two years.<sup>7</sup> The ongoing challenges and uncertainties in this pandemic, as observers have described, are causing mass trauma that is worse than World War II.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, the pandemic is also unprecedented in the breakthroughs in scientific research,<sup>9</sup> business

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<sup>4</sup> It is reported that 25% of companies dropped sales to 72% in the first months and 50% in the succeeding months of the pandemic. See "Tracking an Unprecedented Year for Businesses Everywhere," *The World Bank Newsletter*, February 2, 2017, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/02/17/tracking-an-unprecedented-year-for-businesses-everywhere>.

<sup>5</sup> Dindo Manhit, "Public Health and Economy in the balance," *Inquirer Opinion*, July 24, 2020, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/132062/public-health-and-economy-in-the-balance>.

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Gutierrez, "We Need to Take Action to Address the Mental Health Crisis in this Pandemic," *Time*, May 21, 2020, <https://time.com/5839553/un-action-mental-health-crisis/>.

<sup>7</sup> Pia Ranada, "Achieving Herd Immunity in 2021 Unlikely Says Former Health Chief," *Rappler*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/achieving-herd-immunity-in-2021-unlikely-manuel-dayrit>.

<sup>8</sup> Will Fruer, "WHO Says Pandemic Caused More Mass Trauma Than WWII," *CNBC Health and Science*, last update March 5, 2021, <https://www.cnb.com/2021/03/05/who-says-pandemic-has-caused-more-mass-trauma-than-wwii-and-will-last-for-years.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Milad Haghani and Michiel C. J. Bliemer, "Covid-19 pandemic and the unprecedented mobilization of scholarly efforts prompted by a health crisis: Scientometric comparisons across SARS, MERS and 2019-nCoV literature" *Scientometrics* 125, nos. 2695-2726 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-020-03706-z>.

innovations,<sup>10</sup> and global collaboration and networking.<sup>11</sup> It is shaping a new world with new approaches, new values, and a new lifestyle. Porous boundaries characterize the new life set-up of work from home and online learning.<sup>12</sup> The digital world has become the space in the pandemic for health, commerce, entertainment, education, and even church life. However, it has also increased social inequality with those with digital access benefitting more from the opportunities provided by internet use while those who are vulnerable, having limited to no-digital access have become more disadvantaged and marginalized.<sup>13</sup> The pandemic takes the world at a threshold or a liminal period, a state of “ambiguity,” an experience of being “betwixt and between” the old and the new world.<sup>14</sup>

In the Filipino language, a threshold is translated as *puwang* and is defined as an “unlimited room or space extending in all directions,” or a “space that divides.”<sup>15</sup> It is also an “opening,” or a “hole.” While it is often used as a physical definition of space, many times, the term *puwang* is used to define relations with another as

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<sup>10</sup> Nawal Abdalla Adam and Ghadah Alarif, “Innovation practices for survival of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the COVID-19 times: the role of external support,” *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship* 10, no. 15 (2021), <https://innovation-entrepreneurship.springeropen.com/>.

<sup>11</sup> Dominique Vervoort, Xiya Ma, Jessica G.Y. Luc, “COVID-19 pandemic: a time for collaboration and a unified global health front,” *International Journal for Quality in Health Care* 33, no. 1 (2020), Advance Access Publication Date: 27 June 2020, DOI: 10.1093/intqhc/mzaa065.

<sup>12</sup> W Scott Schieman, Philip J. Badawy, Melissa A. Milkie, and Alex Bierman, “Work-Life Conflict During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 7, nos. 1–19 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2378023120982856>.

<sup>13</sup> “Digital divide is a socio-economic term that refers to inequality of access to information and technology. This technological gap occurs across countries that are being denied with opportunities and basic human rights to use gadgets like smartphones, tablets, and personal computers.” See “Bridging Digital Divide in the Time of Covid-19 Pandemic” *Make Sense Philippines*, July 21, 2020, <https://philippines.makesense.org/2020/07/21/bridging-digital-divide-in-the-time-of-covid-19-pandemic/>.

<sup>14</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 232.

<sup>15</sup> *Tagalog Dictionary*, accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.tagalog-dictionary.com/search?word=puwang>.

it is also used to express the distance between two people, respect, as well as giving in or giving up among many others. When a Filipino speaks about “*puwang sa puso*” it means the person has left a space for the other in one’s heart which may be both painful and hopeful. *Puwang* may also refer to both-and situations. For instance, when Filipinos are in dialogue regarding an issue and they say “*may naiwan na puwang*” it may mean that the issue has not been resolved or it could also indicate that the conversation has created a pathway for peaceful resolutions.

*Puwang* may also refer to a condition. When Filipinos speak about the war era, they define it as a “*malaking puwang sa ating kasaysayan*,” a crack in our history that impacted Filipinos personally and as a nation. It could be traumatic wounds that may be overwhelming and incomprehensible and are “dissociated rather than fully experienced and expressed,”<sup>16</sup> which affect individuals but also impact the social realm.<sup>17</sup> Traumatic threshold moments through natural disasters, poverty, and the violation of human rights through extrajudicial killings, human trafficking, and sexual abuse have also caused pain to Filipinos. While individual trauma may characterize the inability to integrate the experience into one’s understanding of reality,<sup>18</sup> collective trauma, “works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer,” defining communal life and culture.<sup>19</sup>

Like many individual and collective trauma, the pandemic *puwang* characterizes the distance and proximity, the opening and the holes, both individuals and collectivities experience. The pandemic *puwang* emphasizes the common experience that connects each one and the need to act together. As the heroism of

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<sup>16</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, “Suffering,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 25.

<sup>17</sup> Karen O’Donnell, *Broken Bodies: The Eucharist, Mary, and the Body in Trauma Theology* (London: SCM, 2018), 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Several authors of trauma have cited this definition of collective trauma. Kai Erickson, *Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 153-154. See also Jeffrey Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 4.

people from front liners to ordinary citizens and the sense of community is growing in neighborhoods, workplaces, and even on the streets, the pandemic also ignites hope and unites people to “heal as one.”<sup>20</sup> The pandemic *puwang* explored through the concept of liminality and analysis of reflections and discoveries shared by church workers, priests, and laity regarding their personal and ministry experiences, may suggest the significance of this crisis in reshaping church in the new normal.

### LIMINALITY, COMMUNITAS, AND THE PANDEMIC PUWANG

Liminality was introduced by Van Gennep in his study on rites of passage where he studied people and communities as they undergo a change in status (priesthood, marriage, separation, puberty and adolescence, death) and as they celebrate time-related transitions (new year, harvest time, etc.). A common pattern of three stages of separation, transition, and incorporation connects these rites. The stage of transition, which he refers to as *limens* or threshold typifies special moments when people waver between two worlds. Like the period of engagement before marriage or seminary formation before priesthood, liminal periods can “acquire a certain autonomy” and a “territorial passage,” or a spatial position in which the individual or community remains in a certain place for some time.<sup>21</sup>

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 through which new structures and perspectives emerge. Though it is a stage of uncertainty, the liminal

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<sup>20</sup> The Republic Act No. 11469, “Bayanihan “Heal as One Act,” was enacted in March 2020 to combat the spread of the Covid-19 virus and to establish the Philippine Inter-Agency Task Force as the appointed agency, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/03mar/20200401-IRR-RA-11469-RRD.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Alfred van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika Vizedom and Gabrielle Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960), 190-192.

space can also be a space for creativity. While many setbacks point to the experience of death and nothingness, there is a new spirit that emerges, and new pathways are borne at the gap.

Biblical stories and world history as well as contemporary realities especially in this pandemic depict the liminal phase as a process, place, and position. Rituals and new practices created in the in-between give birth to a spirit of community and a sense of oneness that is refreshing and renewing.

### **LIMINALITY: PROCESS, POSITION, PLACE**

In a systematic review of liminal literature from the perspective of organizational development and management, individual and collective liminal experiences enable a deeper analysis of the phenomenon both in human relations and organizational processes.<sup>22</sup> As a place, liminality can be a concrete place or space that may be "outside normal contexts, conditions, and everyday routines." It may be a physical place or a mental space. The Old Testament stories of Daniel in the Lion's Den (Dan. 6) and Joseph who was thrown by his brothers into a cistern (Gen. 37) left to die show how liminal spaces are pivotal in a person's life journey. The experience of Daniel, who was not killed by the lions, despite the authorities' intention, led to the king to believe in God. Joseph was adopted by the Pharaoh and thus led a good life, which saved his own family when they reunited in a surprising encounter. Jesus' sojourn in the desert for forty days and forty nights (Matt. 4:1-11) marked his preparation for life's mission. When he died on the cross, he was buried in a tomb, which became a liminal place for him as he rose from the dead after three days. In this pandemic crisis, we find covid units in hospitals as liminal spaces that put people between death and life. Similarly, it is what locally stranded individuals as well as those on quarantine facilities experience; though not ill they need to be isolated to protect the family and the

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<sup>22</sup> Jonas Soderland and Elisabeth Borg, "Liminality in Management and Organization Studies: Process, Position, and Place," *International Journal of Management Reviews* 20, no. 4 (2018): 880-902 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijmr.12168>.

bigger community from possible contamination. The pandemic has also further complicated, situations of people in challenging liminal spaces. Victims and survivors of the war on drugs, the experience of displaced communities in areas caught in the crossfire between terrorists and government forces, and the ordeal experienced by millions of overseas contract workers typify this liminality – of being a non-entity in the stage of transition, between death and life, between war and peace, or being in a foreign land away from their family to provide for their needs.

As a position, liminality can be identified in an individual or community "holding in-between positions," as they perform a particular role and position, that is permanent or fixed. In this position, they use a "liminality framework to address learning processes," perform "a set of liminality practices," and have "distinct liminality competence to adapt to their position." Prophets and patriarchs in the Old Testament typify this liminal position as they took on the leadership task for the Israelites seeking to follow Yahweh's plan while in exile and in challenging moments in their history. Moses exhibited liminal leadership in his meetings with God and his constant dialogue with the Israelites as they complained of hunger and frustration through their journey to the Promised land. Jesus' courageous opposition to Jewish laws that were oppressing people and his inclusivity that enabled the poor and the outcast, the sick, the women, and all those considered to belong to the "impure" race exemplified this in-between frameworks and practices that empowered people to discover their worth and to embrace a new way of life. Government leadership from top to bottom characterizes this liminal position as they carry out services redefined during this gap. Parents perform a double function of being parents and teachers to their children with online or module learning at home. With regular church activities put on a halt, pastoral ministers continue to render service but adapting to the new normal by dabbling as a church vlogger, doing online counseling, or learning urban gardening.

As a process, liminality could be "temporal" and is associated with a "passing, transitional, and temporary condition" where collectivities rethink their identity and history. As multiple roles and identities are ongoing at the gap, liminality can be

meaning-making and identity-forming. Our ancestors experienced gap moments that are pivotal in their understanding of God and their life as a community. Their liminal experiences throughout the long story of the Exodus – leaving Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, getting lost in the wilderness as well as their long years of exile have shaped them as a faith community and have formed their relationship with Yahweh. In the early Cristian communities' experience of being betwixt and between Judaism and Christianity and their years of waiting for the *parousia* or Jesus' second coming, they were strengthened by the memory and teachings of Jesus reappropriated to their context. The pandemic experiences seem to be an unending process for the entire population subjected to different levels of quarantine. Undergoing the process of being covid positive to covid free, of being vaccinated from the first dose to the second dose, or ensuring one's inclusion in the *ayuda* list characterizes the liminal processes in this pandemic.

### LIMINALITY AND COMMUNITAS

The concept of liminality was explored further from a sociocultural perspective by Victor Turner. He describes the liminal phase as a “midpoint of a transition in a status-sequence between two positions,”<sup>23</sup> As he analyzed various initiation rites either in cultural settings or as membership to organizations, he describes the liminal period as “process...a becoming...and a transformation,” having an inter structural character; one where all forms of “privileges and responsibilities” as well as “superordination and subordination” is eliminated as actors strive for the “common good.”<sup>24</sup> In rituals of initiation, which he studied, neophytes withdraw from their normal positions in society and as a consequence, are also alienated from the “values, norms, sentiments, techniques” that are characteristic of their old world.

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<sup>23</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors...*, 237.

<sup>24</sup> Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period of Rites de Passage,” *Reader in Comparative Religion*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (1979): 234-243, <http://hiebertglobalcenter.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Reading-20-Victor-Turner-Betwixt-and-Between.pdf>



They are also divested of their previous habits of thoughts, feelings, and actions...alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them. Liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection.<sup>25</sup>

Turner studied the process by which societies react and interact during periods of conflict or crisis to restore order and stability. He calls it social dramas as they are transformative moments for people to recreate society and themselves. Consisting of four stages, social dramas proceed in a processual way. When a breach such as the emergence of the coronavirus disrupts life, a crisis emerges. While the spread of the virus initially created a big public health crisis, it has escalated into a global crisis affecting the economy, governance, scientific research, and education among many others. Bringing uncertainty and unwanted pain, the third phase, redressive action becomes a long and complex process. As a liminal period, this stage is crucial before reintegration takes place.

Within the redressive action, the three stages of separation-liminality-incorporation also take place. To handle the crisis, mechanisms are developed – either formal or informal, by the institution or by members of the community affected. Depending on the severity of the crisis, the “social inclusiveness of the crisis...and the degree of autonomy,” enables the fullest expression of “pragmatic techniques and symbolic action.”<sup>26</sup>

It is at this stage that *communitas* is formed, which offers an unstructured space of social bonding distinct from the official structure.<sup>27</sup>

*Communitas* is spontaneous, immediate, concrete – it is not shaped by norms, it is not institutionalized, it is not abstract. *Communitas* differ from the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 240.

<sup>26</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors...*, 39-41.

<sup>27</sup> Victor Turner, *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (New Jersey: Rutgers, 2011), 95-97.

camaraderie found often in everyday life, which though informal and egalitarian, still falls within the general domain of structure...It tends to ignore, reverse, cut across, or occur outside of structural relationships.<sup>28</sup>

There are three types of *communitas* namely: “a) existential or spontaneous *communitas*, b) normative *communitas* referring to those which are organized social systems with goals to pursue, and c) ideological *communitas*, referring to utopian models of societies.”<sup>29</sup> When individuals enter into *communitas* they become “liminal entities,” that “have no status... rank or role, position in a kinship system.”<sup>30</sup> and they live within the margins or the lower rungs of social structure.<sup>31</sup> Within and among them, they experience new life; refreshing and revitalizing the structure. It is important for both *communitas* and structure to continue to coexist and to be in dialogue with each other.<sup>32</sup> The life of *communitas* can be maximized in as much as there is a continuous dialectic with other *communitas*, characterized by undifferentiated equality and with the structure, which is a “system of social positions,” that is hierarchical and differentiated.<sup>33</sup>

When individuals in *communitas* are re-aggregated back in the society or community, they take on a different status achieved through these ritual processes. If this new status is not achievable, a schism takes place, which begins a new phase in the individual’s identity and the development of new structures to support the change.

Through *communitas*, new rituals and practices emerge, emotional cohesion and commitment to the group are deepened implying its potentials to be the space for cultural and political transformation. Turner likens elements of *communitas* to religious life in the Christian tradition and the process that people go

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<sup>28</sup> Turner, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors...*, 174.

<sup>29</sup> Turner, *Ritual Process...*, 131-132.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

through in this phase to the “passage quality of religious life.”<sup>34</sup> Stories of individuals and communities seeking to live church in concrete ways confirm the theory of social drama. From the isolation and distancing that is a mark of this gap, *communitas* offers comfort and camaraderie. Neighborhood group chats, locally displaced individuals, bereaved families, and young people on podcast communities are brought together temporarily without any status, rank, or role but with an experience of camaraderie and kinship at the gap. Within and among them, they experience new life while on lockdown, making sense of their experience at the gap. Similarly, as needs emerge, such *communitas* develops within church structures, innovating new rituals and strategies, either formal or informal to deal with the crisis. New ways of praying either through online bible sharing and masses, home liturgies, and radio devotions are developed. Inter-ministerial endeavors arise in which people find a new sense of belonging and purpose.

Unlike in normal situation where values are managed by actors and meaning by the producers, the social reality in the liminal phase is fluid and not clearly defined such that “power and meaning lies on how they are distributed” as “traditional framings may have to be reframed,” like “new bottle made for new wine.”<sup>35</sup>

The new power will have been channeled into an old and new authority and former authority defenestrated. Closeness will have become distant, and vice-versa. Formerly integrated parts will have segmented; previously independent parts will have fused. Some parts will no longer belong to the field, others will have entered it. Institutionalized relationships will have become informal; social regularities will have become irregularities. New norms and rules may have been generated during

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<sup>34</sup> Turner’s analysis of tribal religious rituals enabled him to extend it in church settings and structure. He saw parallels of the rituals with monastic communities like the Benedictines and even to particular events in church history like the life of St Francis of Assisi and the *communitas* of brothers. Later on, Turner also explored pilgrimages as a ritual process. *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>35</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ, 1982), 78.

attempts to redress conflict; old rules will have fallen into disrepute and have been abrogated.<sup>36</sup>

New narratives develop from lived experience and its meaning is achieved through ongoing reflection especially in how it contributes to the actual outcome of events.<sup>37</sup> The process is significant as participants are taught to be reflexive and open to the "potentiality, the possibility of becoming," at the moment.<sup>38</sup> As the crisis is likened to "chaos of harmonies and discord," the liminal phase facilitates a collective dynamism between main actors and participants. Like a free and open society, liminality and *communitas* strip people of roles creating a "culture of equals," eradicating distinctions fabricated by structures.<sup>39</sup>

### CHURCH IN THE PANDEMIC PUWANG

The pandemic *puwang* reflects an ongoing social drama that defines us in a new way. From the personal to the communal realm, the pandemic impacts both external processes and the inner processes that shape values, mindsets, and practices. It also reflects the constant tension between structure and *communitas* that are emerging in the ongoing social drama.

A series of Bukal ng Tipan online exchanges entitled *Ka-Puwang: Dwelling at the Gap* gathered church workers, priests, and laypeople to share church life and ministry experiences in the pandemic.<sup>40</sup> Their stories, best practices, reflections and ongoing

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<sup>36</sup> Turner, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theater*, 76.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>39</sup> Turner, *Drama, Field, and Metaphors*, 252-253.

<sup>40</sup> *Bukal ng Tipan* (Wellspring of the Covenant) is a pastoral center under the Congregation of Immaculate

Heart of Mary (CICM) promotes the vision of a participatory church in the world. The pastoral team accompanies local communities in organizing and sustaining BECs, facilitates faith formation and spiritual experiences to various individuals and groups, and provides pastoral training for pastoral workers, clergy, and laypeople. The online exchanges in May-October 2020 were a three-part series of three episodes each. Each episode was designed to engage participants in

questions in the pandemic gap highlights the meaning-making process of liminality and the *communitas* that are shaping a church in the new normal.

## DECONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES AND ROLES

When the first lockdown was announced and parishes were disallowed to celebrate masses on-site, a clergy participant confessed to asking the question, “what is my role now?” Feeling disoriented with sacramental duties temporarily put on halt, some priests admit to being challenged to redefine their priestly ministry. Danny Pilario, a theologian actively engaged in pastoral work and social advocacies, suggests that in this pandemic, the “cultic priesthood” is deconstructed, and from “liturgical fixation,” the clergy is challenged to adapt through “liturgical innovation and creative inculturation.”<sup>41</sup> “Beyond formalistic, sanctioned and rubric-dictated liturgies,” they need to be open to “creative worship beyond church walls and traditional liturgical rituals.”

The shift from the “priest-centered mega-churches to the small churches of the home (*ecclesia domestica*)” is opening new possibilities. Leading people back to the essential connection of family and community underscores the role of the family as the domestic church. Participants share stories of how their families are brought together through the daily online masses. Interestingly, some parents were also quick to adapt to the new mode by leading family worship leaders using the liturgical guides originally used for their chapel celebrations.

In the local communities, when senior leaders were restricted to leave their homes and were compelled to withdraw from their ministry duties, young people took over leadership functions and handled tasks they were not initially trained to handle. Youth leaders from a parish in Navotas became lay

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conversations in breakout rooms as well as plenary dialogues with sharers from local communities. See [www.bukalngtipan.net](http://www.bukalngtipan.net).

<sup>41</sup> Estela Padilla, “A Church Interrupted...A Church on the Move, 3” in *Presencing: New Evangelization in the New Normal Bukal ng Tipan Online Series*, accessed May 3, 2021, <http://www.bukalngtipan.net/3-church-interrupted-church-on-the-move>.

ministers distributing communion to the sick and became the lead group to distribute relief goods and to create a database of parishioners and families.<sup>42</sup> The pandemic was also the opportunity for young people to bring in their technological know-how and creative strategies in setting up the social communication ministry.

The pandemic liminality pushes parishes to be proactive, as they learn to “combat the temptation of self-sufficiency and indifference,” and to find ways to effectively respond to the needs of the poor and marginalized.” Many participants hailed the heroism of the poor themselves, who despite being the most vulnerable, are front liners in their communities. 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. Bp. Jose Cabantan, archbishop of the Diocese of Cagayan de Oro, quotes PCPII's definition of the church in this pandemic as both a “flawed and a potent resource” as he affirms the power of the BECs that live the church of the poor in the pandemic, who despite being constantly “at the altar of sacrifice,” build the church in the pandemic through their “simplicity, generosity, and capability to change.”

Parish communities also realized the essential connection between church and government for a more effective response to needs on the ground. Weng Daquilanea, a lay pastoral worker from the Archdiocese of Jaro, notes how the lockdown has “nurtured these essential connections” and reinforced “faithful reliance.” Though some kind of collaboration was already taking place between the church and local government entities in the pre-pandemic, many participants share that the pandemic has galvanized it and has taught the church to be a team player by also rendering services outside the normal pastoral activities.

### **LIFE AS THE CONTEXT (AND CONTENT) OF FORMATION**

The online space has become the main platform for daily masses, ministry meetings, catechetical instructions, and other parish activities. For Mary Ann Cruz, a Catholic educator,

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<sup>42</sup> Video interview, June 2020.

cyberspace has opened rich resources made available to all. “Formation has become not only more available but, in a way, convenient” and for this “the Church continues to be present – ever present...more available.”<sup>43</sup> With possibilities to learn new things online, people see the value of faith education in dialogue with other disciplines. Parishes also provide webinars to inform parishioners about coronavirus and the value of vaccines. Health experts, psychologists, local government officials are invited to provide inputs in online parish meetings and assemblies. Additionally, some participants, share how similar interests and needs created community chats and developed online strategies to minister to one another and render services.

On the other hand, most of the participants also express their concern for people without access. “How can we reach those who are not online?” Full-time ministers and leaders are wary of this especially since those without gadgets and internet access are the most vulnerable and in need. In a parish in the Diocese of Paranaque, BEC leaders are financially assisted for digital access so they can participate in online parish assemblies and training so that they can relay it to their members. SMS text messages sharing Bible reflections and short prayers guides are also done by a diocese in Western Visayas.

Like other educational institutions, seminaries immediately redesigned their courses to enable their seminarians to attend classes and continue with their apostolates through the use of vlogs, blogs, and other social media platforms. Some seminaries quickly adapted by rediscovering the setting of the home as an essential place of formation. They didn’t have to go to the seminary but instead, took online classes at home and continued to engage in parish ministry during weekends. Fr. Andy Lubi, Rector of Saint Augustine Seminary shares that they are pushing for a “greater emphasis on auto-formation and the exercise of responsible freedom,” by empowering seminarians to design their “personal formation program” which includes nurturing physical and mental

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<sup>43</sup> Padilla, “A Church Interrupted...,” 4.

health, as well as a “buddy system” for fraternal support and communal discernment.<sup>44</sup>

Fr. Renato de Guzman, a Salesian priest handling pastoral formation, stresses that faith formation in the pandemic 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. Since people are aware that everyone is in need, there is a certain openness to share fear and anxieties, even to a stranger. Life conversations and questions become the stimulus for people to listen to one another and God’s message through one another. One participant shares how faith formation for her in this pandemic happened through “pakikipagkapwa” (helping my neighbor) because she has learned more about herself and God by listening to people’s needs and seeking to respond to them as much as she can. A trained catechist also confesses that the pandemic humbled her to realize that her task is not just to inform but to relate. As she realized her unpreparedness to adapt to online teaching, it was the students who helped her step by step.

### NEEDS SHAPING NEW MINISTRIES

The *puwang* has brought out countless needs from the economic to the psycho-spiritual concerns of families and communities and from these developed new ways of serving and ministering. In the Parish of Sta Clara Parish, the parish priest and its lay leaders innovated their ministries to respond to the challenges in the pandemic.<sup>45</sup> They created new ministries collectively called KADAMAY NILA TAYO (We are in solidarity with them) which stands for the different ministries namely K for Kuwentuhan (story-telling) A for Ani (harvest), D for Daop (reach out), A for Asa (hope), M for Media, Y for Youth, NILA for Nilay

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Video Interview, June 2020.



(reflect), T for Tulong (help), and YO for Payo (counseling). Hapag (table) as their chosen symbol represents many things – food, sitting together as disciples and servants, and *salu-salo* (sharing of meal/fellowship) in their context also involves dialogue, planning, and dreaming together. When asked how the different ministries work together and if the old structure still works, the parish pastoral council head Ramil Correa says, they have discovered the word “interministeriality” as he explains that it is about *saluhan* (pitching in, complementing) and *damayan* (cooperation, solidarity). As such, needs take precedence over structure.

Some neighborhoods enjoy 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-19 updates but as a means to respond to the needs of residents for transport, food, and other services. Some BECs were quick to develop livelihood programs to help neighbors facing unemployment. BEC meetings in one community included tutorial classes for children since some of the mothers were not capable enough to assist their children. A locally based international NGO advocating against human trafficking reports that the pandemic has exponentially increased the occurrence of such cases in the country.<sup>46</sup> Since the lockdown has perpetuated domestic and sexual abuse in the homes, they developed online strategies to report cases and listen to stories of victims, to provide counseling and community intervention, and to conduct court proceedings to speed up apprehension of offenders and collaborative rescue operations.

The reshaping of ministries and the birth of new ones, reflect Pope Francis' metaphor of the church as a field hospital.<sup>47</sup> As small mobile units or ambulances were established near the battlefield to respond to the needs of soldiers to attend to the surgical needs and immediate care of those on the front line. Memoirs of field hospitals reveal practices that may not be

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Devin Watkins, “Pope at Audience: Church as field hospital that cares for sick,” *Vatican News*, August 28, 2019, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-08/pope-francis-general-audience-church-cares-for-sick.html>.

according to medical standards but are done so to respond to the greater need to preserve life.<sup>48</sup> Ordinary doctors or medical students were given the rank of 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.

### **“UNSTRUCTURED AND HIGHLY STRUCTURING”**

Throughout history, there have been tensions between the church as *communitas* with the bigger society, or *communitas* or liminal groups like tribal religious groups, feminist movements, and the basic ecclesial communities to name a few with the hierarchy.<sup>49</sup> In this pandemic, however, as *communitas* push the agency of individuals to the forefront and as it produces new modes of conduct and thought, creative and dynamic tension is felt in varying degrees and multiple levels, which typifies the “playfulness of the liminal period,” in an “unstructured and highly structuring,” way.<sup>50</sup> The pandemic puwang is breaking new grounds and entering uncharted areas.

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<sup>48</sup> “We operated in old blood-stained and often pus-stained coats.... We used un-disinfected instruments from un-disinfected plush-lined cases, and still worse, used marine sponges which had been used in prior pus cases and had been only washed in tap water. If a sponge or an instrument fell on the floor it was washed and squeezed in a basin of tap water and used as if it were clean. Our silk to tie blood vessels was un-disinfected...The silk with which we sewed up all wounds was undisinfected. If there was any difficulty threading the needle, we moistened it with...bacteria-laden saliva, and rolled it between bacteria-infected fingers. We dressed wounds with clean but undisinfected sheets, shirts, tablecloths, or other old soft linen rescued from the family ragbag. We had no sterilized gauze dressing, no gauze sponges.... We knew nothing about antiseptics and therefore used none.” Jeffrey William Hunt, *Field Hospitals: An Overview*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/applied-and-social-sciences-magazines/field-hospitals>.

<sup>49</sup> See Carl Starkloff, “Church as Structure and *Communitas*: Victor Turner and Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies* 58, no. 4 (1997).

<sup>50</sup> Bjorn Thomassen, “The Uses and Meaning of Liminality,” *International Political Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2009):20.

...the most basic rules of behavior are questioned, doubt and skepticism as to the existence of the world are radicalized, but the problematizations, the formative experiences, and the reformulations of being during the liminality period proper will feed the individual (and his/her cohort) with a new structure and set of rules...<sup>51</sup>

It facilitates popular ministry that challenges a church on “maintenance mode,”<sup>52</sup> and pushes church leaders to take the “smell of the sheep.”<sup>53</sup> At the *puwang*, needs cannot be addressed without people’s participation. Dialogue is crucial at every step, engaging people collaboratively and with respect. At the *puwang*, ministry becomes a space to “discover new charisms,” to embody “*damayan* from the heart,” to journey together towards the fullness of life.

### KA-PUWANG-KAPWA: RESHAPING CHURCH TOGETHER

To be companions at the gap is to be *ka-puwang*. Being and becoming at the gap conveys a shared identity with the other. In this liminal space, the pandemic *puwang*, we become; together. Some authors define *ka-puwang* as the root word of *kapwa*, a core Filipino value.<sup>54</sup> Though *kapwa* loosely translates as the other, *kapwa* means a shared identity, a shared self with the other.<sup>55</sup> To

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*: Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), no. 24.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>54</sup> Though *kapwa* is also said to come from the root word of *ka-pawang*, which means “fellow” or “sameness,” to take *ka-puwang* as the root word, as some authors have suggested, emphasizes a *locus*, that brings about this shared self with the other.

<sup>55</sup> It was Virgilio Enriquez who pioneered in developing liberation psychology and considered the father of Filipino Psychology. He explored the understanding Filipino personhood including the philosophy of *kapwa*. His exploration of *kapwa* as a core Filipino value has also influenced the birth of the *pakapa-pakapa* (“groping”) approach in indigenous research. Virgilio Enriquez, *From Colonial to*

accept and deal with the other person as equal is embodying *pakikipagkapwa*. *Pakikipagkapwa* not only has socio-psychological dimensions; it has “a moral and normative aspect as a value, and *paninindigan*,” an ethical commitment.<sup>56</sup> *Pakikipagkapwa* suggests a praxis of participation that facilitates the building of the church in the liminal space through *kapwa* attitudes and paradigms of listening, margin-dwelling, and witnessing to the depths.

### 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 is unique. A *kapwa* church listens to the silence, extending the virtue of *pakikiramdam* (shared inner perception) to stories that are not voiced out and to voices that are not heard. 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.

As *kapwa tagapakinig*, the church as the listener is challenged to listen to the stories of the suffering of people while also being attentive to the connecting stories in ecclesial life. Being a listener in the “in-between” calls us for a listening that does not blame or judge as well as feeling both the pain of loss and the strength to survive.<sup>57</sup> It is in this way that *ecclesia docens* (a teaching church) can transform into *ecclesia discens* (a learning church).<sup>58</sup>

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*Liberation Psychology* (Diliman, Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 1992), 52.

<sup>56</sup> Virgilio Enriquez, “Filipino Psychology in the Third World,” *Philippine Journal of Psychology* 10, no. 1 (1977):7.

<sup>57</sup> Marcia Mount Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 131.

<sup>58</sup> Francis, *Papal Address at the Ceremony commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops*, October 2015, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papafrancesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario\\_sinodo.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papafrancesco_20151017_50-anniversario_sinodo.html).

Listening entails *panunuluyan* (inserting and immersing oneself in the realities of people), *pakikipagkuwentuhan*, (engaging in community storytelling), and *nakikiugaling pagmamasid* (participatory observation). Listening to practical wisdom embedded in individual and collective responses will reveal “politics of pastoral care” that leave those in real need out of the picture. In this sense, by intentionally reflecting on lived experience and situated knowledge to promote purposeful practices, it encourages orthopraxis and advances pluriformity.<sup>59</sup>

### KASAMA SA PUWANG: CHURCH AS MARGIN-DWELLING

A *kapwa* church embraces ambiguity where “human logic is suspended.”<sup>60</sup> Perhaps this inadequacy of logic can also be expressed when doctrines or prescribed practices are temporarily held for the greater purpose of saving lives and facilitating a real encounter with God and others. 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 accompany people in the liminal period is to realize that their situation and God’s grace are “mysteries which no one can fully know from without.”<sup>61</sup> To be margin-dwelling as a church is to allow people to claim their share in interpreting or reinterpreting practices. This enables “new metaphors, new

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<sup>59</sup> The pandemic as a time of uncertainty reflects characteristics of the post-modern world. In an age of uncertainty, Elaine Graham proposes transforming pastoral practices in conversation with gender and feminist perspectives by emphasizing the “diversity and contingency of the human nature,” by regarding “truth as a web of discourse,” and by taking “human agency as historically situated, embodied and contingent” among many others. Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 199-200.

<sup>60</sup> Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 76.

<sup>61</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 172.

writings, new interpretations,” to emerge so that new practices can develop informed by these stories.<sup>62</sup>

**SAKSI SA DILIM:  
CHURCH AS WITNESSING TO THE DEPTHS**

A *kapwa* church witnesses to the depths as it sees the *puwang* as a re-creative state where each one is invited to grow holistically. 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.”<sup>63</sup> 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. In the Filipino culture, the Spirit is communal energy that is harnessed in the most trying times, which is more “the power to will, rather than the will to power.”<sup>64</sup> To witness to the depths enables the Spirit to recreate us anew; the image of the *ruach* and the *pneuma* together; the oneness and unity of *lakas* (power) and *ganda* (goodness, beauty). A *kapwa* church facilitates communities towards acquiring “cultural energy,” that empowers them towards a “collective agency” and a “collective capacity” at the *puwang*.<sup>65</sup> It is in such a collective process of witnessing to the depths that the church participates in the healing and transformation of the world in the pandemic liminality and beyond.

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<sup>62</sup> Terry Veiling, *Living in the Margins: Intentional Communities and the Art of Interpretation*. (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 138-139.

<sup>63</sup> Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 117.

<sup>64</sup> Albert Alejo, *Generating Energies in Mount Apo* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.