

The first Kenyan program on pedagogies for community: creating a shared space

From January 11th to January 16th, 2024, the Kenyan Program on Pedagogies for Community (KPPC) embarked on a profound mapping journey across Kenya. Our mission was clear: to identify individuals across various communities who could collaborate with the school to actualize the dream of a vibrant summer school program towards the end of the year. This endeavor was more than just an activity; it was a quest for shared experiences and practices that could redefine our understanding of communal engagement and belonging and civil society that is entrenched in the differences of Who is Kenya, what is Kenya (community, culture and conflict).

Our journey led us to different parts of Kenya, from Lari in Kiambu county to Rusinga and Mfangano islands in Lake Victoria. In Siaya we had an experience that put us at the center of why our differences and belonging do matter, we had an encounter with the Legio Maria Church—a testament to the rich tapestry of Kenyan spirituality and cultural heritage. Founded in 1963 by Simeo Ondeto and Gaudencio Aoko, the Legio Maria Church stands as a beacon of African independent faith, rooted in divine revelation and indigenous wisdom and this made it an interest for the first program for the Kenyan team.

As we entered the sacred confines of the church compound, we were greeted with sacred place under a tree where all the followers would remove their shoes and keep them before they could proceed to the church. We were welcomed by the bishop and his congregation. Despite the ongoing church service, the bishop graciously invited us to engage in dialogue—a gesture that spoke volumes about the ethos of inclusivity and hospitality that permeated the Legio Maria community despite the buildup assumptions we had about the church and their attitude towards the “others” who were us.

We sat under a tree, we immersed ourselves in the narrative of the Legio Maria Church—a narrative that defied categorization and invited us to explore the complexities of faith, identity and belonging of the Legio church. The Bishop, with a voice steeped in wisdom and humility, shared the story of the church's inception and its enduring commitment to spiritual renewal and social justice.

Yet, it was a moment of profound intimacy that left an indelible mark on our souls. Following the discourse, the bishop, embodying the essence of sacred ritual, offered to bless us—an invitation that took us by surprise and stirred a sense of curiosity and reverence within us. The bishop gestured at us to go and kneel down near the entrance door and face the front of the church, at a glance, we noticed that there were no seats, the congregations sat on the floor. We knelt down and waited as the bishop went into the church and wore a different attire which was believed to be worn when administering prayers, after a few minutes the bishop appeared in a green gown and he carried with him what seemed like a liquid in a bottle. He started from one end of the queue springling the liquid on our heads and shoulders as a sign of blessing us, after that, he then advised everyone of us to open their mouth wide so that he could splash the same liquid inside the mouth too and to our surprise the bishop ordered us not to spit but swallow it. Many of my team members were shocked and looked so uncomfortable by this act but they all had to swallow the water anyway, they were already in this space, and spitting would have been a sign of disrespect (But again if one of us could have refused to take the water we would have understood). After the act, the bishop said we can leave as he was done administering the blessings. As we walked towards the car, I could see the fear, confusion and surprise in my team's eyes. This was a connection that

transcended cultural boundaries and illuminated the shared space that we all should create to engage the other who is not like us.

In that sacred space, surrounded by members of the Legio Maria community, we experienced the essence of reflective practice in its purest form. We were challenged to confront our assumptions and preconceptions, to embrace the unfamiliar with open hearts and minds despite being uncomfortable, and to find common ground amidst the diversity of our experiences.

As we bid farewell to the Legio Maria Church, we carried with us more than just memories; we carried a renewed sense of purpose and possibility. The encounter had reaffirmed our belief in the transformative power of engagement and difference, and it had ignited a spark within us to continue our journey towards building a civil society where people can live together differently without erasing the other who is different from them.

In the tapestry of Kenyan communities, each thread—whether it be of tribe, faith, or tradition—contributes to the rich tapestry of our national identity and through our initiative (Kenyan Program on Pedagogies for Community (KPPC)) we have taken the opportunity to weave these threads together, creating a mosaic of unity and diversity that reflects the true spirit building a community in a divided world surrounded by different tribes.

As we look to the future, we draw inspiration from the lesson of shared experience at the Legio Maria Church and embrace the beauty of our shared humanity. For it is in our collective journey towards understanding and acceptance that we will truly discover the Kenya we aspire to be—a Kenya where every voice is heard, and every soul is valued despite our belonging and differences.