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Ministry



Manicured lawns and paved walkways accentuate buildings and facilities at the St. Joseph Spiritual Center in Karen, a suburb southwest of the Nairobi central business district. The hospitality and conference center is under the management of the Little Daughters of St. Joseph. (Wycliff Oundo)



by Wycliff Peter Oundo

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Sheryl Grunwald is an instructor for international attendees in a conference at the St. Joseph's Spiritual Center, a devotional and conference facility under the management of the Little Daughters of St. Joseph that caters to both religious and civilian groups. She says the hospitality her group has experienced at the center is why she prefers it over traditional conference centers in Kenyan hotels.

"The sisters are price flexible, compassionate and patient. They tweak their facilities and service to the needs of our attendees," Grunwald explained. "The center's affordability and serenity make it the preferred venue to host our conference theme."

She is a trainer with the Global Children's Forum Leadership Experience, an annual international conference attended by representatives from various children's ministries. Her group is among 80 local and international guests that the congregation was hosting on March 14, in their facility located at Karen Shopping Center, a suburb southwest of the Nairobi central business district.

In Kenya, the larger hospitality industry classifies the spiritual center in Karen as a part of meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions tourism. Compared to predominantly nature-based tourism, conference tourism is experiencing a renaissance in Kenya due to the increase in international relations and trade between Kenya and the world.

The Little Daughters of St. Joseph have long been veterans of social charity. However, in 2008 Sr. Virginia Njoki Kago and three other sisters — Srs. Fidelia Zamboni, Joyce Kagutha and Esther Kagendo — were inspired to venture into the arduous hospitality industry by way of a spiritual center that doubled as a conference tourism and lodging facility with a goal of self-sustainability.

"This was just a piece of land where the Maasai grazed their cows," said a reminiscent Kago, the current administrator of the center. "We had no experience in hospitality, just an inkling that it would become our vocation."



Sr. Virginia Njoki Kago, the St. Joseph's Spiritual Center administrator, stands with and Sheryl Grunwald, an instructor with Global Children's Forum's leadership experience conference. The international conference consisted of members from various children's ministries and was hosted at the conference center for four weeks. (Wycliff Oundo)

For the next two years, the four sisters toiled to establish a small community and erect a few buildings to cater to guests' needs. By 2020, they had scaled the center from a parcel of land to its current status of 56 self-contained accommodation units, three conference halls, a dining hall, five chapels, a kitchen and a formation house.

A few years of running the facility exposed the congregation's lack of experience in Kenya's hospitality industry. They were plagued by numerous challenges, such as unfurnished facilities, poor marketing skills, and a lack of managerial expertise, which hurt their guest retention rates.

"When we began operations in 2010, we had no marketing, hospitality and accommodation expertise. We had no skilled staff," Kago said. "I had to go to school and learn these skills to overcome our challenges; I enrolled for a leadership and administration course."

After her studies, Kago returned to the center, inspired to reduce its overhead while bolstering internal operations. Her first move was to ensure staff retraining in respective departments to match the service both the local and international guests expected. She then prioritized guest feedback and the quality of service offered by the center.



Sr. Virginia Njoki Kago, the administrator of the St. Joseph's Spiritual Center, attends a conference for the Bible Society of Kenya. The group was among three local and international guest cohorts that the Little Daughters of St. Joseph hosted on March 14 at their hospitality and conference center. (Wycliff Oundo)

"What our guests say about their experience in the facility is important; when I learned that they preferred self-contained rooms, we had to refurbish and refurnish the accommodations to include a bathroom and a toilet," she said. She also ensured that food quality and staff demeanor to the guests were top-notch. "The hospitality sector is susceptible to quality of service, which we are not exempted from just because this is a center managed by religious women," Kago said.

The Karen center is operated by eight congregational sisters and a staff of 20 trained locals. The staff consists of guards, three chefs and sisters trained in culinary arts who can oversee food preparation, 13 trained housekeepers, a gardener and a receptionist. The community sisters assist in staff oversight and day-to-day operations.

The center hosts about 500 monthly guests from organizations, businesses and communities. Guests attend themed conferences, and outreach and team-building exercises, and stay overnight and eat all meals at the center.

"We charge conference attendees about $30.62 per head per night [including meals]. The amount is competitive considering similar conference facilities offered by traditional hoteliers would set you back $78.74 per head per night," Kago said.

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>
> —Sr. Virginia Njoki Kago
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The low charges guarantee the center bookings even during April to May and November off-peak seasons. Good guest turnouts ensure that the congregation offsets operational costs and pays salaries.

"Although our vocation is in hospitality, we have to ensure the center stays self-sustainable by operating as a business. That is why we charge our guests an accommodation fee," Kago added.

The congregation's venture hasn't been without setbacks; the sisters had to meet industry operational standards. These included the city's sanitation department's water and sewer regulations, environmental audits, Ministry of Health guidelines for accommodation facilities, a fire clearance license, and a business permit from the Nairobi City Council.

They also faced numerous business challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic that escalated following Kenya's Ministry of Health containment measures for the hospitality sector. These restrictions slowed the hospitality industry's operations by 71% from March to July 2020. New COVID-19 protocols that restricted hoteliers to only offer food takeaway services reduced operations by 97%, an all-time low, in March and April 2021, according to a survey by the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis on the effects of the pandemic on the hospitality sector in Kenya.

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The St. Joseph's Spiritual Center was among countless other hospitality centers that shut operations due to the pandemic containment measures. Kago had to close the center for almost two years as the pandemic raged. She accredits the center's survival to miscellaneous budgeting and the congregation's minimalist approach to spending.

"We thank God because our savings sustained the staff and the center as the pandemic raged. Most accommodation facilities had to lay off their staff. We were fortunate," she said.

Post-pandemic bookings recovered to 112 guests per week. The income from its guests enables the center to facilitate accommodation for novitiate sisters studying in various institutions in the city. She has also been able to raise salaries for her staff to cushion them from inflation.

Kago's greatest achievement as administrator is the center's rapport with its guests. Without a marketing budget, the congregation relies on word of mouth from the guests to acquire new customers. A strategy that reduces their overhead costs and ensures guest satisfaction is prioritized.



Srs. Bernadette Mumo, left, and Claudine Dushimirimana of the Little Daughters of St. Joseph prepare vegetables for a lunch buffet at a kitchen in the St. Joseph Spiritual Center in a Nairobi suburb. The sisters are among eight congregational sisters who assist in staff oversight and the center's day-to-day operations. (Wycliff Oundo)

"The secret to success in this industry is how you treat your guests, just like the Bible encourages us to be hospitable. We tend to all guests without discrimination of faith or nationality; that's why guests keep rebooking and recommending us locally and internationally," she said.

Kago maintains a good relationship with her local parish, the Regina Parish, under the Archdiocese of Nairobi. The center's facilities are always open for the local priests and congregations to hold parish seminars and retreats.

For guests like Grunwald, staying at the St. Joseph's Spiritual Center during her organizational conferences isn't an act of charity but of mutual empowerment. "When we hold our events here, our attendees benefit from the facility's services

and inadvertently support the congregation in its social projects," she said.