

# **Former Volunteer Study: How Service Impacts Volunteers**

July 2021



**An evaluation project in collaboration with the Ministry  
Leadership Center and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation**

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## Preface

Stories of service help the Church and world understand the transformative power of what you offer. Stories help you become better known and respected. Stories allow the field of faith-based service to expand to impact more people and communities. Stories help build relationships. Stories are shared with narrative and personal reflection – and through data and analysis. Both are important for your mission. Both can help you promote your vision.

In 2013, Catholic Volunteer Network commissioned “A Survey of Former Volunteers of the Catholic Volunteer Network.” The findings of this national survey, conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University, demonstrated a strong connection between service and volunteers’ faith and vocational discernment. This helped elevate CVN’s presence as a thought leader and provided new partnership opportunities.

One opportunity is an ongoing, eight-year relationship with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. This partnership has provided resources to explore more measurement, evaluation, and learning (MEL) practices, including access to a MEL consultant – the Ministry Leadership Center. With this support, CVN discerned the need for more thorough exploration of the outcomes CVN member programs seek as part of the volunteer experience. This Former Volunteer Study is one result of that process.

Studies such as this one help tell the story of faith-based service. CVN will share a version of this report with external stakeholders and partners, but this version was created especially for you, our CVN member programs. We hope these findings are affirming and encouraging. We pray they help strengthen the ways our network approaches program management, sustainability, and innovation. If you would like permission to cite data or need more information about this project, please reach out to Katie Delaney, CVN’s Manager of Strategic Learning and Evaluation:

[kdelaney@catholicvolunteernetwork.org](mailto:kdelaney@catholicvolunteernetwork.org)

Special thanks to the Ministry Leadership Center and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation for making this project possible. And thanks to you for your commitment to faith-based service.

## Introduction

In late 2019 and through 2020, CVN engaged in an intensive analysis and evaluation process with the Ministry Leadership Center (MLC) to better understand key dimensions of the volunteer service experience. While there are multiple stakeholders that are affected by faith-based service, we were particularly interested in the **practices, relationships, and mechanisms that help generate desired outcomes for volunteers**. Some of the key questions we sought to answer in this evaluative inquiry were:

How much and what types of **reflection** occurs for volunteers within the service experience?

How much **personal, interior and/or spiritual growth** do volunteers perceive in themselves over the course of their service experience?

How much growth do volunteers perceive in their capacity to **contribute to positive outcomes** in the communities in which they built relationships and served?

What were the **most significant factors** that are associated with volunteer growth?

What are **the implications of service** for volunteers in terms of personal and professional priorities?

What type of engagement is occurring in terms of **racial justice and diversity initiatives** within member programs?

What suggestions do volunteers have to **strengthen programs** that CVN members offer?

In total, we had 239 responses from alumni that completed service between 2013 and 2019. In this survey, volunteers looked back on how they perceived themselves at the beginning of their service experience and how they perceived themselves at the end of the experience. The demographic section of the report provides detailed information of the composition of this group of respondents.

All results were deemed statistically significant using appropriate methodologies by a professional statistician who conducted the analysis. As a report created for CVN members, we hope these findings are helpful in encouraging your work and strengthening your approach to program management, including volunteer recruitment, training, support, and formation.

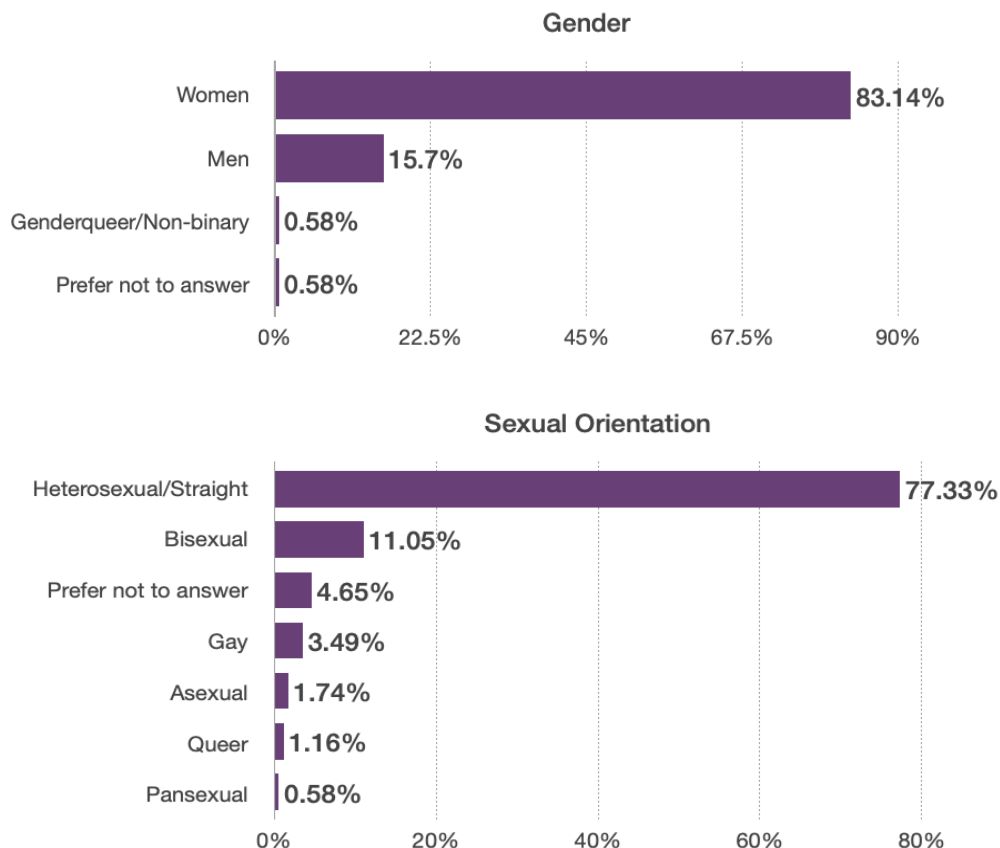
# Volunteer Demographics

There were 239 respondents from approximately 80 distinct programs that responded to this survey.

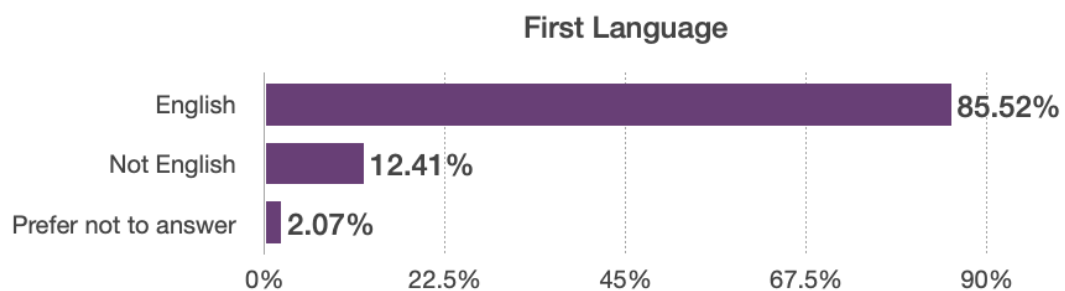
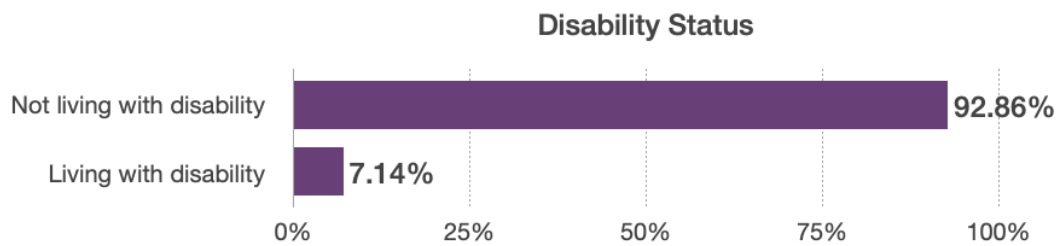
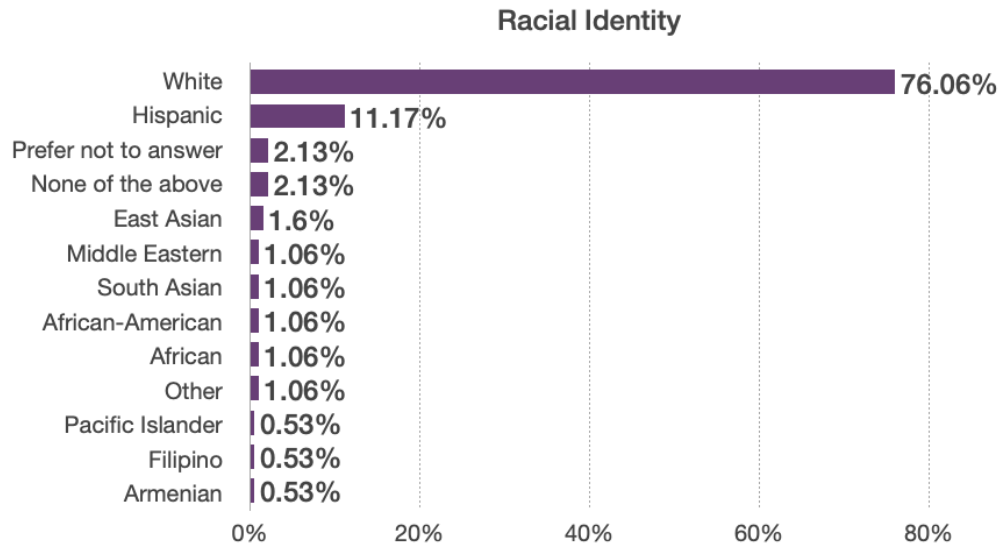
At the beginning of the Demographic Section, we included an explanation for the rationale behind these questions along with a reminder that all survey responses were optional and anonymous:

*Catholic Volunteer Network invites you to respond to the following Demographic questions. Your responses will help us understand the identities of current/former volunteers and help inform our efforts to foster diversity and champion racial justice in the field of faith-based service. (Read our Commitment to Diversity and Racial Justice in full on [CVN's website](#)).*

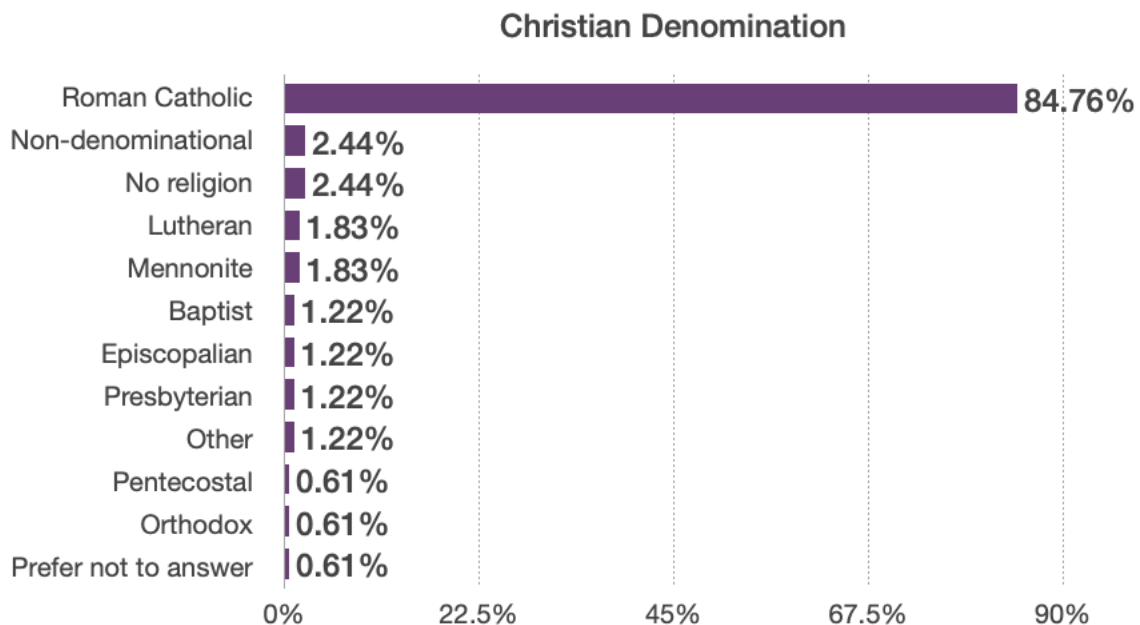
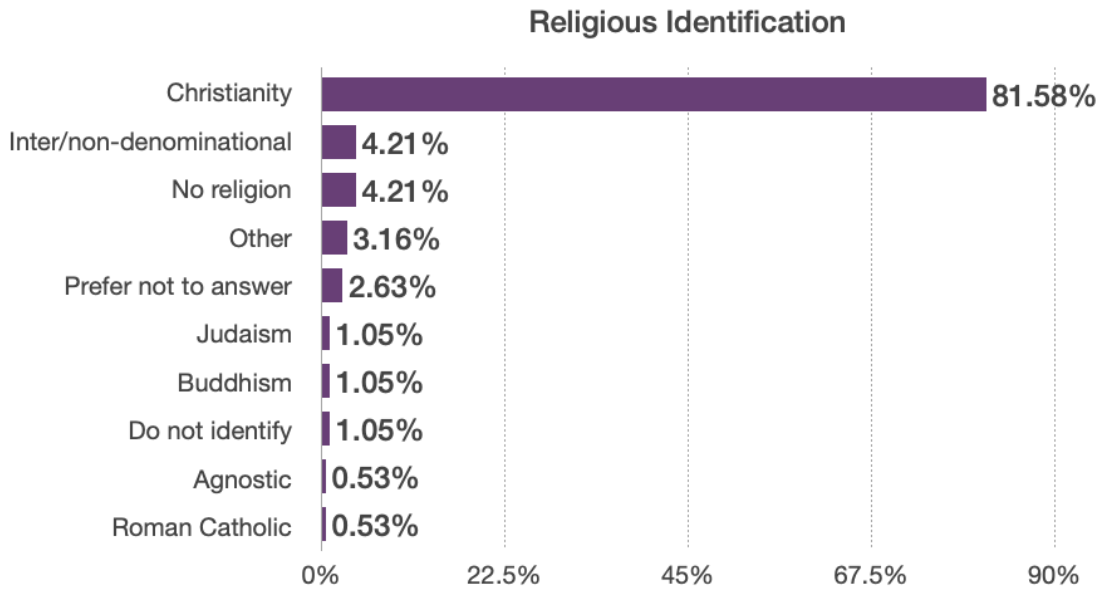
*Your responses to these questions, as with all responses to this survey, are anonymous. We will never share your personal information or individual responses. You also have the option not to respond to any of the following questions by selecting, "Prefer not to answer."*



# Volunteer Demographics

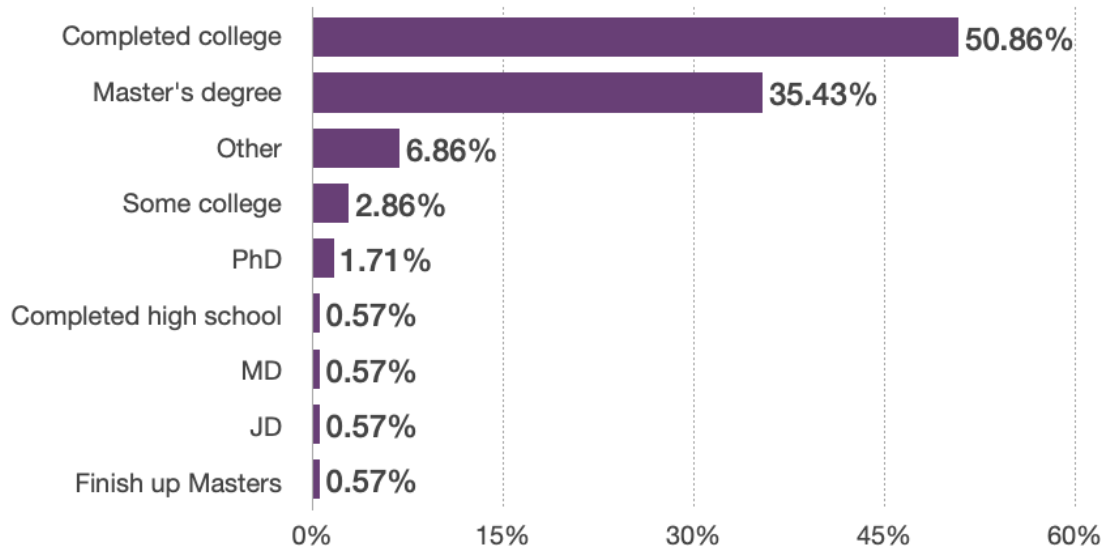


# Volunteer Demographics

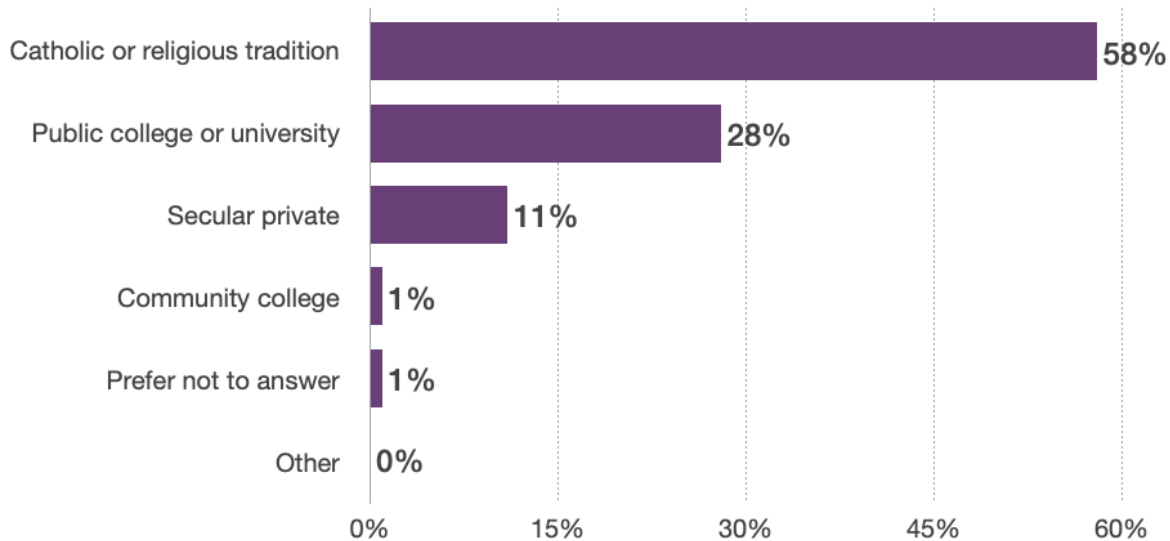


# Volunteer Demographics

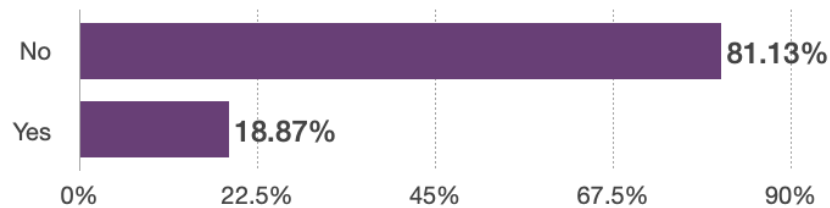
Level of Education



Type of College Attended



First Generation College Student





# Reflection Practices



Photo: St. Joseph Worker of Orange, CA

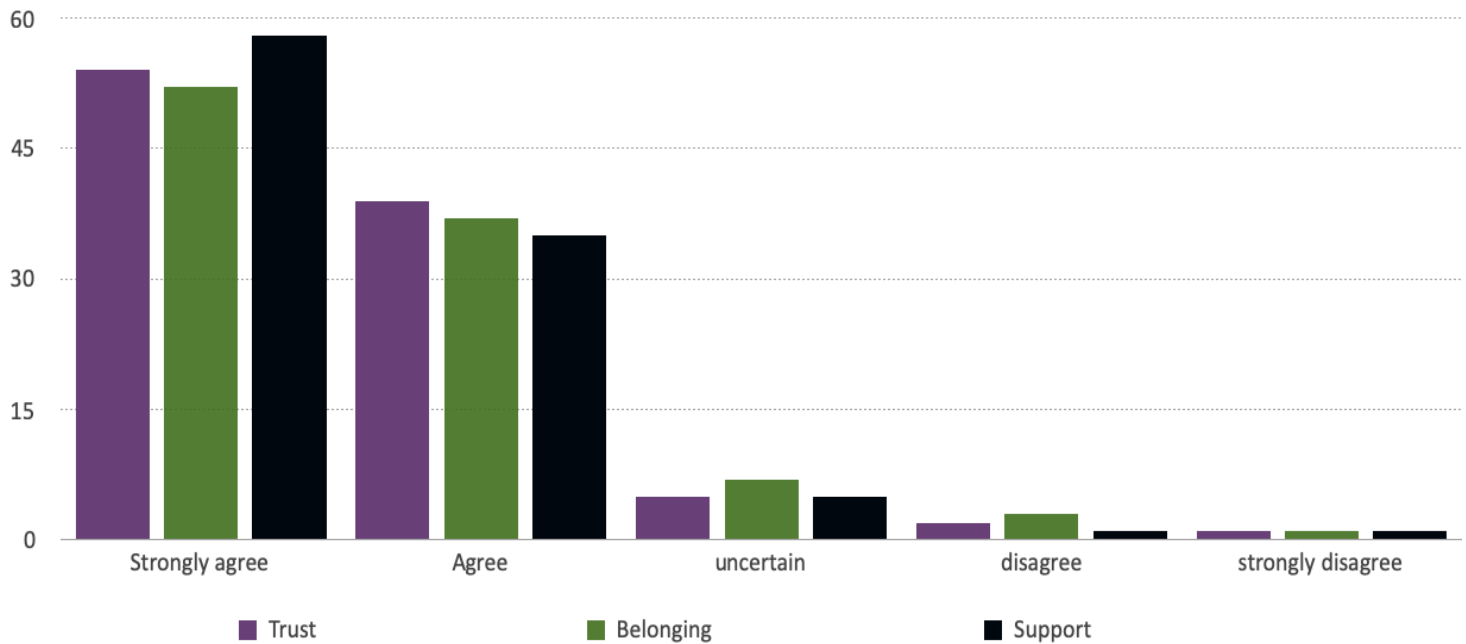
I have been  
praying  
more and  
living more  
simply

As a general term, *reflection practices* are inclusive of shared prayer/spirituality nights, one-on-one mentoring, spiritual direction, retreats, and reflections shared with others on social media platforms.

Of the 239 respondents, the vast majority, 97%, engaged in some form of reflection during their service year, with most of them reporting at least weekly structured reflection experiences.

During those experiences of reflection, 93% of those responding reported feeling a sense of trust with the people with whom they reflected and felt supported as they tried to make meaning of their experiences. In addition, 90% reported feeling a sense of belonging with the community with which they reflected. These baseline, high levels of support assure that any reported lack of growth is not primarily due to a lack of trust, belonging, or support.

## Feeling Trust, Belonging, and Support During Reflection Experiences



The following chart displays the types of reflection experiences, in terms of frequency, that volunteers engaged in during their service experience. The majority of volunteers experienced shared prayer/spirituality nights daily to weekly, one-on-one mentoring and/or spiritual direction monthly, participated in retreats twice a year, and shared experiences through blogging, podcasting, etc. monthly.



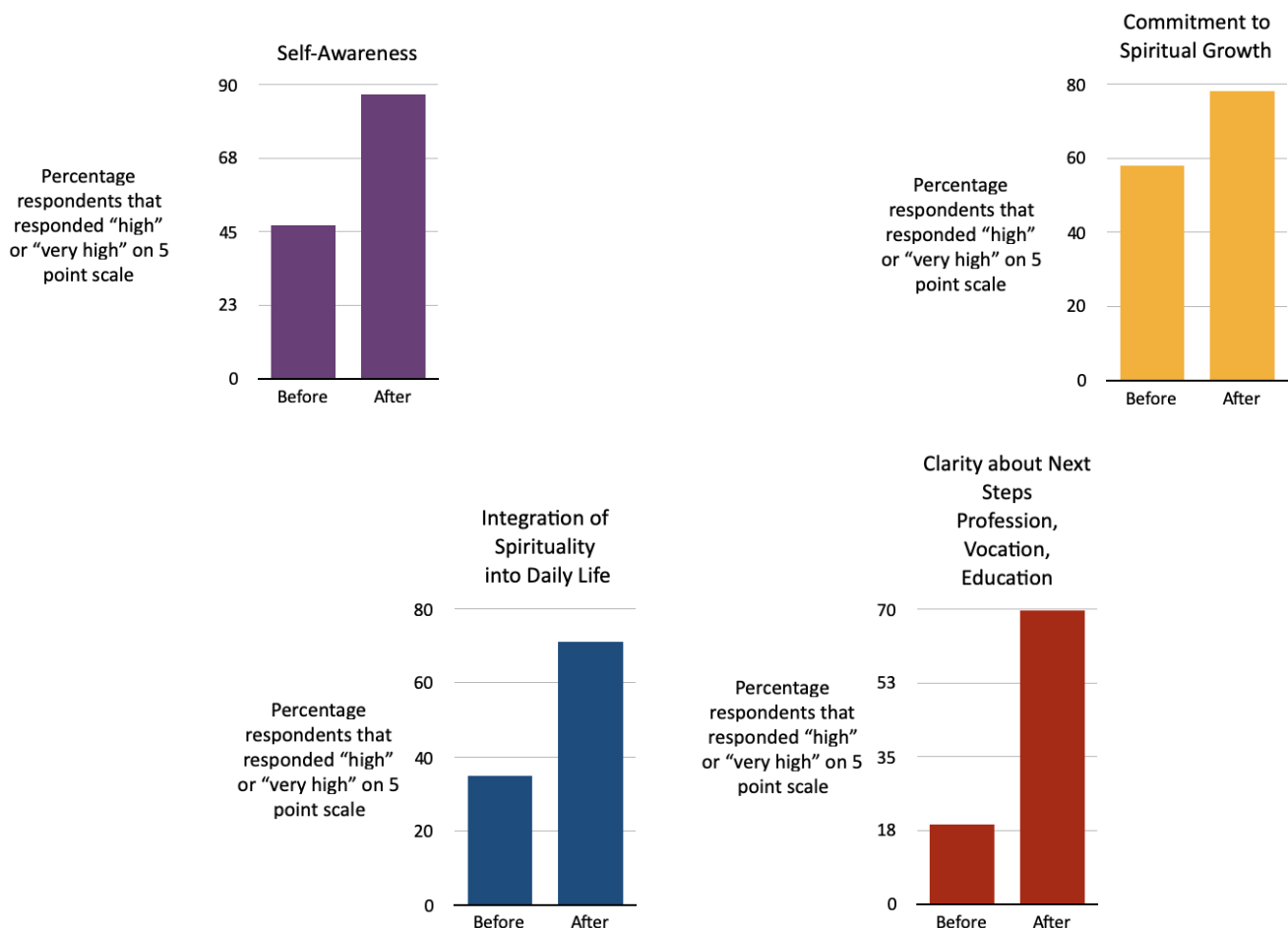
Photo: Salesian Volunteers

	Daily	2-3 per week	Weekly	2-3 per month	Monthly	Every 2-3 months	Twice a year	Less than twice a year	N/A
Shared prayer/spirituality nights	27.3%	21.0%	33.4%	7.2%	8.1%	1.3%	0.5%	0.0%	1.3%
One-on-one mentoring with program staff/staff/other mentor assigned by program	3.2%	4.5%	11.3%	13.1%	33.0%	2.7%	20.1%	4.1%	8.1%
Spiritual Direction	0.4%	2.7%	5.9%	6.4%	30.9%	1.8%	9.1%	7.3%	35.4%
Participation in retreats	0.4%	0.5%	0.4%	0.9%	10.0%	20.5%	54.6%	6.8%	5.8%
Personal reflection shared with others (writing blog posts, creating podcasts, etc.)	7.8%	7.8%	11.2%	7.8%	19.4%	7.9%	9.9%	10.7%	17.6%

# Volunteers' Perception of Personal/Spiritual Growth

Personal, interior, and/or spiritual growth is a hoped-for outcome for many volunteer programs, and anecdotally verifiable; but a retrospective pre-post survey with quantitative items had not been done by CVN before. The data demonstrates **consistent, considerable personal growth results from the service experience**. Respondents collectively expressed statistically significant personal growth in areas of self-awareness, capacity for self-reflection, commitment to spiritual growth, integration of spirituality into daily life, and clarity about next steps with regard to profession, vocation, and/or education.

The bar charts below compare the percentage of respondents who scored themselves “high” or “very high” on these five dimensions of personal growth before and after the service experience.



We also asked respondents to rank which dimensions of their service experience were **most impactful** for personal growth. The four most impactful experiences for former volunteers looking back on their service experience in order of impact are as follows:

**first-hand experiences and relationships at service sites** with those they served

**reflection practices**, debriefing and reflection with an intentional community, e.g., spirituality night

**spiritual direction**

**retreats and personal reflection shared with others** through blogging, podcasts, etc.

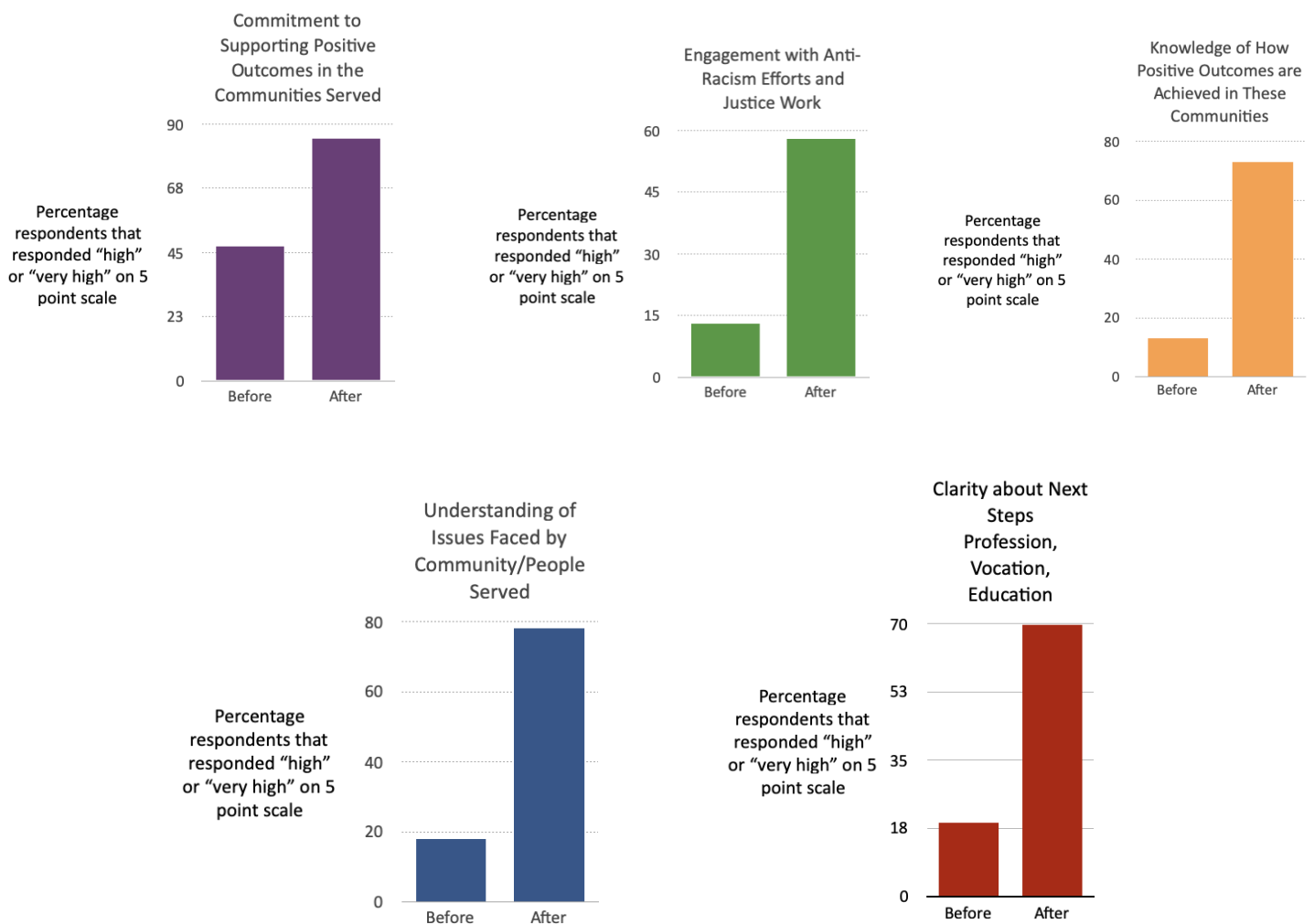
The type of reflection **least associated** with personal growth was one-on-one mentoring.



*"My life was forever altered by my service year. I see the world with a new, more informed, and more complex perspective about the lived reality of refugees/immigrants/people of color."*

# Volunteers' Perception of their Capacity to Contribute to Positive Outcomes in the Communities Served

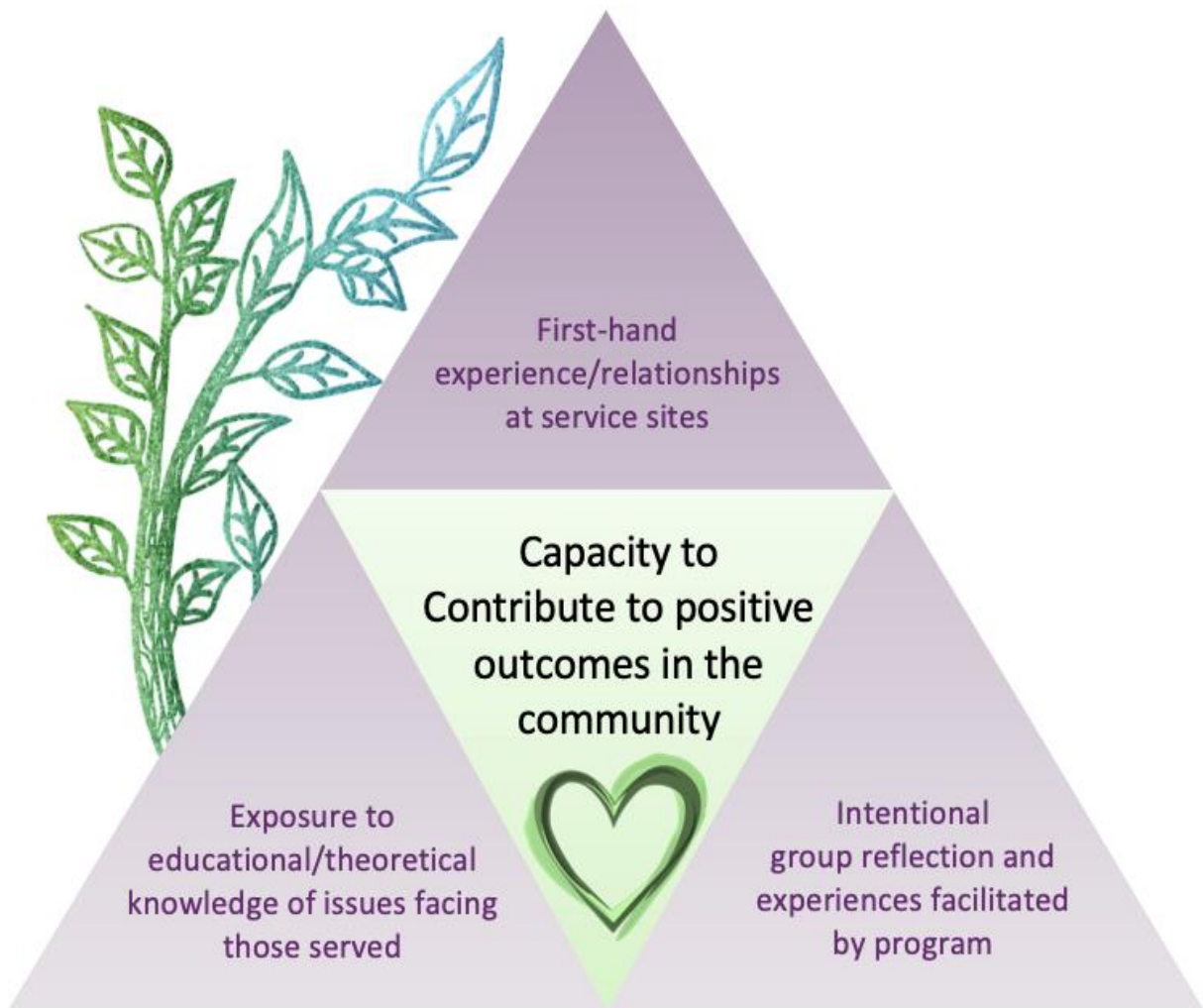
Even more than personal growth, volunteers reported **very substantial growth** in their **capacity to contribute to positive outcomes in the communities they served**. Participants grew in understanding issues faced by the community and people they served and grew in their commitment to support positive outcomes in those communities through knowledge of how those outcomes could be achieved. In addition, participants' engagement in anti-racism efforts and justice work grew because of their volunteer service experience. Further analysis specifically on engagement with anti-racism efforts is reported below.



*"My service experience increased my emotional intelligence. I have a better sense of who I am and where I am called to be. That has led to me making more grounded personal and professional decisions."*



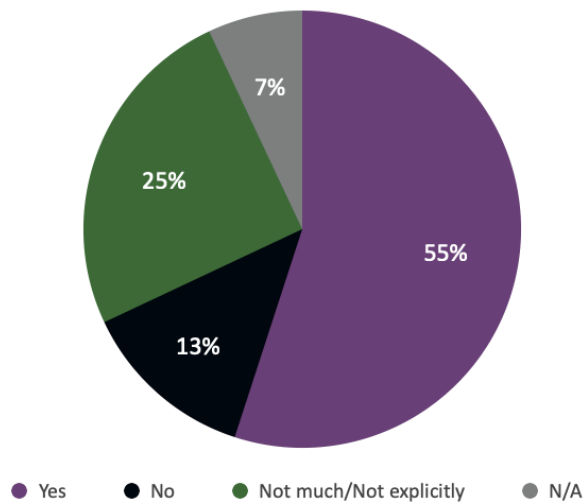
Participants reported **three main contributors** to the growth experienced in regard to their capacity to contribute to positive outcomes in the community they served. The **greatest impact** was *first-hand experiences/relationships at their service sites and with those they served*. This is followed by exposure to educational/theoretical knowledge of issues facing those served. In addition, intentional group reflection and experiences facilitated by the volunteer program, supported growth in this area.



# Anti-Racism Efforts and Programming

55% of respondents reported engaging in anti-racism work as part of their service program experience. Responses to the open-ended question, “Did your service experience inform your engagement with anti-racism work? If so how?” indicate that both **knowledge and awareness of racial injustices are as important as learning and understanding the root causes and systemic injustices that gives rise to racial injustice.**

Did you engage in anti-racism work/  
training as part of your program?



However, this knowledge, awareness, and learning takes place primarily through the **regular** exploration of racial injustice, particularly through volunteers’ reflection on their lived experience, rather than onetime programmatic offerings. This does not lessen the importance of the programmatic offerings—as many participants reflected on the effectiveness of programming. It does, however, suggest that programs which **create opportunities for relationship building with diverse communities and include personal and communal reflection on racial injustice** are more effective than those that offer programming alone.



Photo: Bilingual Education for Central America

## Strengthening Programs to Support Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

We received 123 responses to the question, “Do you have suggestions for service programs or the field of faith-based service to improve our anti-racism efforts and/or deepen our commitment to justice? We welcome recommendations of individuals or organizations to partner with towards these efforts.” They were analyzed and sorted thematically into the following. Items mentioned 4 or more times are included:

VOLUNTEER IDEAS TO STRENGTHEN ANTI-RACISM EFFORTS	FREQUENCY MENTIONED
Providing regular opportunities to discuss and reflect on anti-racism, white savior complex, specific actions to take all rooted in acknowledgment and humility	26
Integrating anti-racism training into orientation and retreats BEFORE service	21
Providing on-going anti-racism education through newsletters, blogs, speakers, with an emphasis on hearing from BIPOC speakers	17
Broadening outreach and recruitment efforts, including financial counseling/support to diversify volunteers	11
Prior to service understanding more about specific service sites, the communities we will be accompanying, and the role of racism in those communities	11
Exploring racism at a structural level within the administration of the service program and the church more broadly	7
Diversifying program staff, leadership	5
Creating spaces, support, affinity groups for BIPOC in programs	5
Integrating anti-racism work with Catholic Social Teaching, justice and human dignity	4
Setting expectation of anti-racism and racial equity within communities and at service sites from the start	4
Inviting BIPOC speakers/theologians/Sisters to speak on anti-racism and faith	4
Self-reflection on white savior complex/ privilege and/or experiences of racism	4



## Strengthening Programs to Support Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

We also asked respondents if they had any specific resources they would recommend to support and strengthen anti-racism efforts. The following list is a summary; items with an asterisk were mentioned more than once:

Service Never Sleeps\*

DART Center

Anti-defamation League work

Red Hill Farm—for perspective on Black community's relationship to land

Fr. Josh Johnson, livestreaming

Harvard's Implicit Bias test as a baseline

Erase Racism, New York City

Equal Justice Initiative\*

Bryan Massingale, author

Providence Connections

The Haitian Project

How to be an Antiracist (Ibram X. Kendi book)

Chicago Regional Organizing for Anti-racism\*

Crossroads\*

Bethany Welch in Philadelphia

People's Institute for Survival and Beyond\*

Showing Up for Racial Justice

From Mission to Mission

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

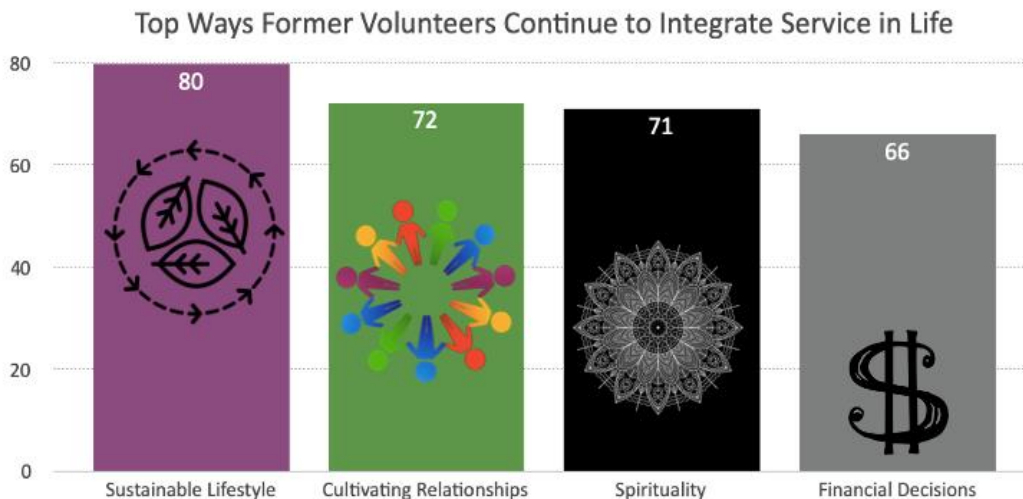


Photo: Amate House

*"I came to my service year with a white savior complex without realizing it. During my service I was able to recognize it within myself, see the harm, and learn about how to truly benefit the people I am trying to serve without centering myself."*

# Life Post-Service

Directly after a year of service, 51% of former volunteers reported obtaining employment, and 28% began graduate studies. The following categories had less than 6% each: college, religious life, a different program, and internship. When asked what former volunteers are doing now, a few years out from their service experience, similar numbers are reported, with 13% less in graduate studies presumably due to graduation. 94% of respondents reported that they continue to integrate their service experience in their lives through various ways and expressions of relationships building, civic/justice work, and through spiritual, personal, and financial decision-making.



It has shaped every “next step” decision I’ve taken since. I can root everything back to my year of service. It showed me what I’m capable of and where my passion is. So many transferable skills were gained during that year!



“I refer to my year of service as a ‘touchstone’ experience that helped to define my *values*, my *goals*, my *spirituality*, and my *expectations* from relationships and professional work.”

## Conclusion

This report offers insight into ways in which faith-based service programs impact the ongoing personal and professional growth of a person – and how they can do that even better. **Cultivating regular opportunities for reflection** in a context of **trust, belonging, and support** has proven critical to the spiritual development and continued growth of volunteers.

This report also demonstrates that a primary source of volunteer growth stems from **personal relationships—with community, staff, and the people with whom they minister.**

Former volunteers speak deeply about the relationships that impacted their continued growth: “I made life-long friends from living in community”; “friendships from that year are still ongoing”; “I was able to meet people where they are by living in the same neighborhood as those I served”; “I have continued a relationship with my volunteer site and its community”; “I have maintained contact with my community mates and also my Ecuadorian neighbors.” It is vital for member programs to focus on areas of relationship building from which everything else tends to emerge.

As part of cultivating relationships, programs should take seriously the call to engage in **anti-racism work** by providing opportunities for volunteers to build relationships within the communities they live and serve. Programs should seek ways to build diversity within their staff, as well as create equitable policies that make room for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to participate.

This may require changing policies regarding financial requirements and limitations that make service programs inaccessible to many communities of color. CVN’s upcoming offerings – including strategic planning, program management courses, webinars, national gathering, and more – seek to help deepen your commitment to racial justice and diversity. Special thanks to the Racial Justice & Diversity Committee of the CVN Board of Directors for informing these efforts.

Stories of service – moving reflections *and* data – are intimately connected to relationships. May your journey be one of strengthening that connection.

May CVN’s efforts help.