

Sanghabihan: A Narrative Inquiry into the Transformative Leadership Formation of Young Adults in a Lasallian Institution in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study explores *Sanghabihan*, a service-learning and transformative formation program for young adults in the Philippines, rooted in the mission of a Lasallian institution. Using narrative inquiry, the research examines the lived experiences of 16 participants to understand how transformative leadership and values-based formation emerge through community immersion. Data sources included reflective journals, personal letters, and group discussions, which were thematically analyzed through the lens of Lasallian spirituality.

The findings surfaced five transformative themes: encountering interior silence, building kinship through hospitality, redefining leadership as presence, healing through vulnerability, and discovering vocational clarity. These insights contribute to a renewed model of pastoral formation that integrates transformative pedagogy, Lasallian accompaniment, and service-learning. The study offers meaningful implications for youth ministry, Lasallian education, and, most especially, for Lasallian institutions seeking to embody their mission in concrete, life-giving ways.

Keywords: Narrative Inquiry, Lasallian Pedagogy, Youth Formation, Transformative Education, Service-Learning, Filipino Spirituality

INTRODUCTION

In a rapidly secularizing Philippine society, many young adults express disinterest in institutional religious practices, yet a deep spiritual longing persists (Estepa, 2020). The challenge for the Church is to create spaces where faith is not merely taught but profoundly encountered. This paper examines the *Sanghabihan* program—a faith-based, service-learning immersion that invites young leaders into a transformative, experiential, and relational process of leadership formation.

Sanghabihan responds to Pope Francis's (2019) call in *Christus Vivit* for the Church to walk with the young and foster spaces where their leadership and search for meaning are honored. The program's unique contribution lies in its integration of Filipino cultural values, particularly *kapwa*—the recognition of shared identity—and *pakikipagkapwa-tao*, the ethic of genuine relationality. This study explores how *Sanghabihan* becomes a transformative space for young adults and contributes to the mission of pastoral renewal (FABC, 2020). Rooted in Lasallian pedagogy, the program foregrounds the role of educators and Lasallian formators as compassionate companions who journey with the young, emphasizing faith, service, and community as integral to transformative formation.

Theoretical Framework

Three key frameworks underpin this study: transformative education, Lasallian pedagogy of accompaniment, and narrative theology.

- **Transformative Education** fosters personal and social change through practices of reflection, deep listening, and experiential learning (Palmer, 1998; West, 2016). It emphasizes leadership that is grounded in empathy, presence, and social responsibility. It moves beyond the mere transmission of knowledge to fostering critical consciousness, a passion for social justice, and a commitment to action.

- **Lasallian Pedagogy of Accompaniment** underscores the importance of integral human formation, education of the poor, and accompaniment through personal presence (Johnston, 2003). This principle emphasizes a relational and person-centered approach to formation. Sanghabihan embodies this pedagogy by providing young leaders with relational learning spaces where facilitators model accompaniment, foster a sense of belonging, and integrate faith and service into leadership formation.
- **Narrative Theology** views human stories as loci of divine revelation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Freeman, 2001). Participants are encouraged to articulate their own life stories and to listen deeply to the narratives of others, particularly those from marginalized communities. So in Sanghabihan, students' lived experiences become theological texts, revealing the sacred in ordinary encounters.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs narrative inquiry to examine the lived experiences of 16 student leaders who participated in Sanghabihan 2017 in Barangay Trinidad, Guiuan, Eastern Samar. Narrative inquiry is well-suited for formation research as it centers the voice of the participant, valuing stories as authentic sources of meaning (Riessman, 2008).

Data were collected through reflective journals, personal letters written during the program's integration sessions, facilitated group conversations, and post-program evaluations. Ethical considerations included voluntary participation and strict confidentiality. Participants' names were anonymized.

The thematic analysis focused on recurring motifs such as leadership transformation, intercultural encounters, faith development, and emotional resilience.

The researcher's positionality—as a Lasallian formator—was acknowledged and critically reflected upon to ensure authenticity, transparency, and ethical rigor in the narrative inquiry process. This insider role shaped the research in meaningful ways: it fostered relational trust with participants, enabling deeper sharing and reflection rooted in mutual respect and shared spiritual language. At the same time, the researcher remained attentive to the influence of personal commitments and theological orientation, employing reflexive practices such as journaling, peer conversations, and memo-writing to examine how these might shape interpretations. This balance of empathy and critical distance allowed the analysis to be both contextually grounded and ethically sound, ensuring that the voices and insights of participants remained central. Ultimately, this posture of reflective accompaniment—consistent with Lasallian educational values—not only shaped the interactions and thematic interpretations but also contributed to the study's overall trustworthiness, making space for stories to be received as sacred texts and interpreted with pastoral attentiveness and scholarly integrity.

FINDINGS AND THEMATIC NARRATIVES

The analysis surfaced five key themes, elaborated below:

Thematic Area	Description	Participant Insights
In the Face of the Void	Participants faced discomfort through physical simplicity and interior silence, which became thresholds for deep reflection.	"The silence was deafening at first, but later I realized it was God calling me to listen to my own heart."
Becoming Guest and Kin	Relationships with foster families transformed participants from visitors to kin, rooted in <i>kapwa</i> and <i>pakikipagkapwa-tao</i> .	"We arrived as guests, but they treated us as their own. I saw the Gospel lived in their daily simplicity."
Leadership as Presence	Leadership was redefined from task-driven roles to relational presence, shaped by compassion and active listening.	"Leadership is not about being at the front. Sometimes, it's about sitting quietly and just being there."
Wounded Healers	Personal wounds became sources of empathy, allowing participants to accompany others in their pain.	"I thought I came to help them, but they helped heal me. My brokenness became my bridge to others."
Contemplatives-in-Action	Prayer, service, and reflection were integrated into daily rhythms, fostering vocational clarity and transformative mission.	"I used to ask what career I wanted. Now I ask: what is my mission? I hear God more clearly in the margins."

DISCUSSION

The Sanghabihan program demonstrates that faith formation can flourish in spaces of service, silence, and story. In contrast to traditional leadership training, the program emphasizes transformative leadership, rooted in empathy, presence, and shared humanity. This affirms Merton's (1961) invitation to see with the contemplative eye: to be fully present to God, self, and others.

Participants' transformation was not superficial; it involved encountering discomfort, building intercultural friendships, and embracing their woundedness. The program embodied the Lasallian pedagogy of accompaniment, where facilitators served as co-pilgrims, nurturing discernment and critical reflection. This relational dynamic echoes the Lasallian conviction that educators are more than instructors—they are companions who walk with learners in the journey of faith and life.

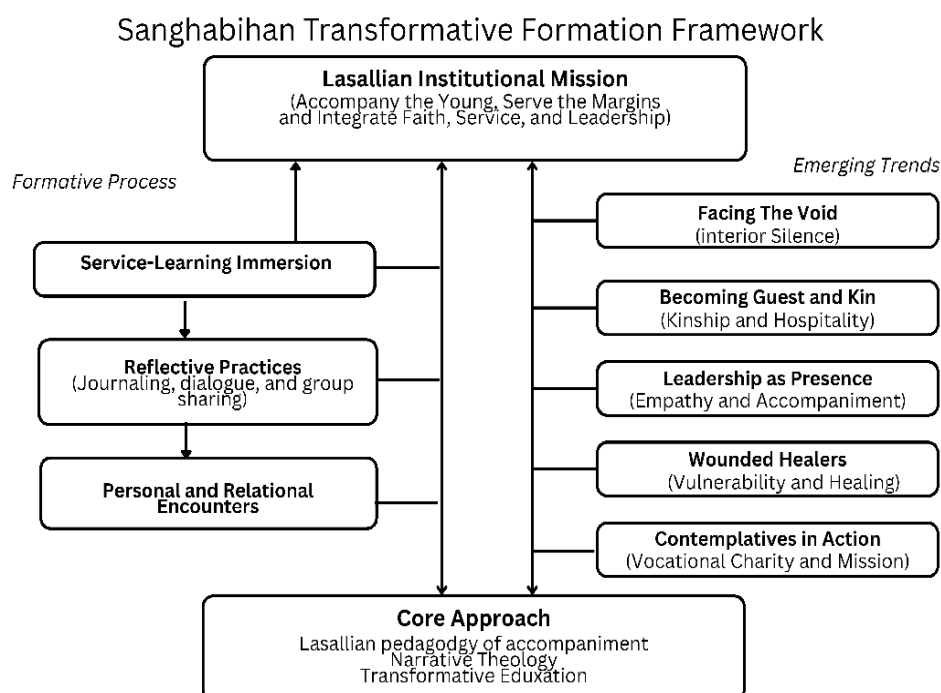
Sanghabihan also aligns with the Lasallian mission to serve the poor and marginalized. By immersing student leaders in communities on the periphery, the program cultivates leadership as a vocation of service and solidarity, hallmarks of Lasallian formation.

For the Church in Southeast Asia, Sanghabihan offers a model aligned with the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC, 2020) vision of a dialogical, participatory, and prophetic Church. Programs like Sanghabihan invite faith communities to create liminal spaces that are culturally grounded, relational, and spiritually integrative.

Sanghabihan Transformative Formation Framework

Following such discussion, this study proposes the Sanghabihan Transformative Formation Framework, which stands as a distinctive approach to holistic development within the Lasallian institution in the Philippines. Rooted in the core principles of Lasallian spirituality and pedagogy, this framework guides student leaders and volunteers through a profound journey of self-discovery, community engagement, and faith-inspired leadership. The term "Sanghabihan," of Filipino origin, evokes a sense of weaving together, aptly capturing the framework's integrative approach to formation.

At its heart, the Sanghabihan framework is a service-learning program designed to cultivate leaders who are not only competent and effective but also compassionate, reflective, and dedicated to social transformation. It is a structured process that intertwines academic learning with real-world community engagement, guided by a distinct set of principles and practices.



The Sanghabihan framework unfolds through a dynamic and iterative process that integrates action and reflection:

- **Service-Learning Immersion:** This is a cornerstone of the framework, where participants engage in meaningful and sustained service with partner communities. This immersion is not merely an outreach activity but a deep encounter with the realities of poverty, injustice, and social exclusion. It provides the context for learning and the impetus for transformation.
- **Reflective Practices:** To deepen the learning from the immersion experience, the framework incorporates a variety of reflective practices:
 - **Journaling:** Participants are encouraged to maintain journals to document their experiences, thoughts, and feelings, providing a space for personal reflection and integration.
 - **Dialogue:** Structured dialogues provide opportunities for participants to share their experiences and insights with one another, fostering a sense of community and shared understanding.
 - **Group Sharing:** Facilitated group discussions help participants to collectively analyze their experiences, connect them to broader social issues, and discern appropriate responses.
- **Personal and Relational Encounters:** The framework places a strong emphasis on the power of authentic human connection. Through their interactions with community members, mentors, and fellow participants, individuals are challenged to move beyond stereotypes and to build relationships based on solidarity and kinship.

The transformative journey of the Sanghabihan framework is designed to cultivate a set of key dispositions and capacities in its participants, which are articulated as "Emerging Themes" or formation outcomes:

- **Facing the Void (Interior Silence):** Participants are guided to cultivate a practice of interior silence and contemplation, allowing them to confront their fears, biases, and vulnerabilities. This process of "facing the void" is essential for developing self-awareness and a deeper connection with God.
- **Becoming Guest and Kin (Kinship and Hospitality):** Through their immersion experiences, participants learn to enter communities not as saviors but as guests, open to receiving and learning from their hosts. This fosters a sense of kinship and solidarity, breaking down barriers of social and economic difference.
- **Leadership as Presence (Empathy and Accompaniment):** The framework redefines leadership not as a position of power but as a way of being present to others. It emphasizes the importance of empathy, active listening, and accompanying others on their journey of growth and empowerment.
- **Wounded Healers (Vulnerability and Healing):** Recognizing that everyone has their wounds and vulnerabilities, the framework encourages participants to embrace their brokenness and to find strength and compassion in their shared humanity. This allows them to become agents of healing and reconciliation in a wounded world.
- **Contemplatives-in-Action (Vocational Clarity and Mission):** The ultimate goal of the Sanghabihan framework is to form individuals who can integrate their faith and their actions in the world. It aims to help participants discern their unique vocation and to commit themselves to a life of mission-driven leadership in the service of others.

Alignment with the Lasallian Institutional Mission

The Sanghabihan Transformative Formation Framework is a powerful embodiment of the core mission of Lasallian institutions. It directly contributes to the broader goals of:

- **Accompanying the Young:** The framework's emphasis on mentorship and personalized formation is a clear expression of the Lasallian commitment to accompanying students on their journey of faith, learning, and service.
- **Serving the Margins:** By immersing participants in marginalized communities, the framework fosters a deep and lasting commitment to serving the poor and advocating for social justice.
- **Integrating Faith, Service, and Leadership:** Sanghabihan provides a concrete and effective methodology for weaving together the core elements of a Lasallian education, forming leaders who are not only professionally competent but also ethically grounded and spiritually mature.

In essence, the Sanghabihan Transformative Formation Framework is a testament to the enduring vitality of the Lasallian charism. It is a dynamic and contextually relevant approach to formation that continues to inspire and empower a new generation of leaders committed to building a more just and humane society

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Sanghabihan illustrates the transformative power of service-learning for young adults. Through spaces of encounter, silence, and immersion, youth are formed into compassionate, mission-driven leaders.

This study recommends:

- Institutionalizing Sanghabihan as a core formation pathway in Lasallian higher education institutions as a concrete expression of their mission to provide transformative, inclusive, and faith-integrated education.
- Developing theological integration modules that explicitly draw from Lasallian spirituality, enabling students to interpret experiences through the Lasallian lens of faith, service, and community.
- Expanding research on transformative service-learning models to strengthen Lasallian formation practices across socio-cultural contexts and educational levels.
- Strengthening partnerships among Lasallian educational communities to create and sustain similar formation spaces that embody the mission of accompanying the young, especially those at the margins.
- Embedding Sanghabihan-like programs within the strategic priorities of Lasallian institutions as a direct pastoral expression of their educational mission to nurture holistic, socially engaged, and spiritually grounded leaders.
- Encouraging Lasallian educators and Lasallian formators to embrace their role as companions in faith, journeying with young people through immersive experiences that cultivate empathy, critical reflection, and a deepened sense of vocation.

Ultimately, Sanghabihan calls Lasallian institutions to embody their mission not only within the classroom but through lived accompaniment in the peripheries. By trusting the stories of the young and walking with them in vulnerable, shared spaces, Lasallian institutions can continue to be transformative communities of faith, service, and accompaniment for the world today.

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