

Chapter 2:

Determine What Being Mennonite Means, Both Culturally and Spiritually

A primary goal for MC USA with this project is to have a more complete picture about how members perceive, define, and understand “being Mennonite” from multiple dimensions. This objective was further solidified during the discovery calls that Springtide conducted with key stakeholder groups. Beyond demographics, groups all identified that there is not a cohesive understanding about what shapes and unites the Mennonite identity. Discovery calls revealed that people want to know more about what members think about the Mennonite identity, both culturally and spiritually.

This chapter explores what members shared in the survey and in their stories about their perceptions, definitions, and understandings of “being Mennonite” from multiple dimensions. This chapter synthesizes the dimensions into two key themes: cultural and spiritual. Thus, MC USA has a succinct picture of the Mennonite identity that leads to actionable insights.

Culturally

Themes emerged about the individual Mennonite identity, the identity of the denomination in the larger world, and how Mennonites relate to other denominations. This theme explores the perceptions,

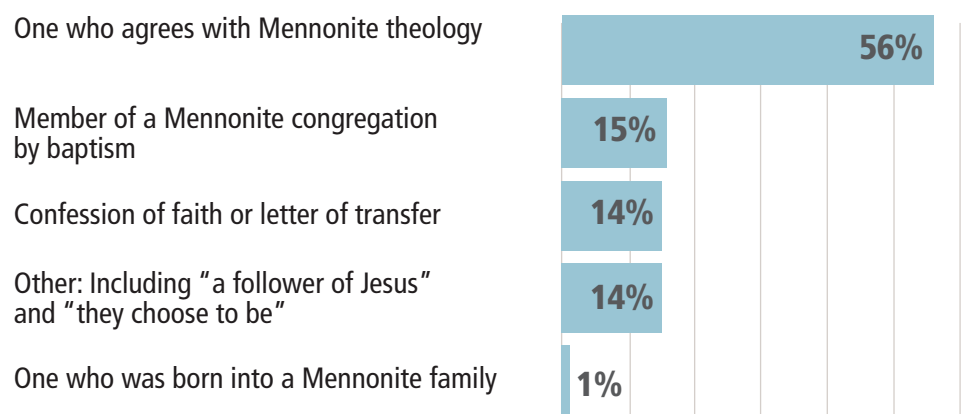
definitions, and understandings that members have about the cultural aspects of being Mennonite, including dimensions such as origin, traditions, practices, norms, language, artifacts, and community. During our discussions with stakeholders, people wanted to know if there was a difference between those who were born Mennonite and those who opted in, as well as what it looked like to fall somewhere in the middle of those two ends of the spectrum.

The Individual

To define *Mennonite*, participants answered questions designed to explore the various dimensions of faith identity, similar to those used in previous sociological studies and those used by Kanagy in 2006. It is not enough to simply define *Mennonite*. One must understand the nuances of the Mennonite identity. The definition is, however, a starting point for conversations about the multiple dimensions of “Mennonite.” As participants shared their stories, the concept of origin was a key topic. Specifically, though 73% of participants grew up with both parents identifying as members, only 1% of survey respondents define *Mennonite* as “someone born into a Mennonite family.” The majority (56%) define *Mennonite* as “one who agrees with Mennonite theology.”

The other 43% of respondents broke down almost equally among these categories: a member of a Mennonite congregation by baptism (15%), a confession of faith or letter of transfer (14%), and other (14%), which respondents explained as a combination of the answers above or that a person must identify themselves as Mennonite to be Mennonite.

Who Is a Mennonite?



Follow-up interviews emphasize that connecting to and identifying as Mennonite come from faith, especially today when so many folks face exclusion and othering when traditional ethnic components are emphasized. Participants acknowledge the historical significance of cultural traditions but emphasize that focusing on these things alone limits the growth and diversity of the denomination and alienates non-cradle Mennonites.

The following quotes capture how a growing number of Mennonites feel about this identity. Largely, the sentiment is that being Mennonite should be a choice because it is a doctrine, but that ethnic and cultural exclusion create conflict for those who were not born into the faith.

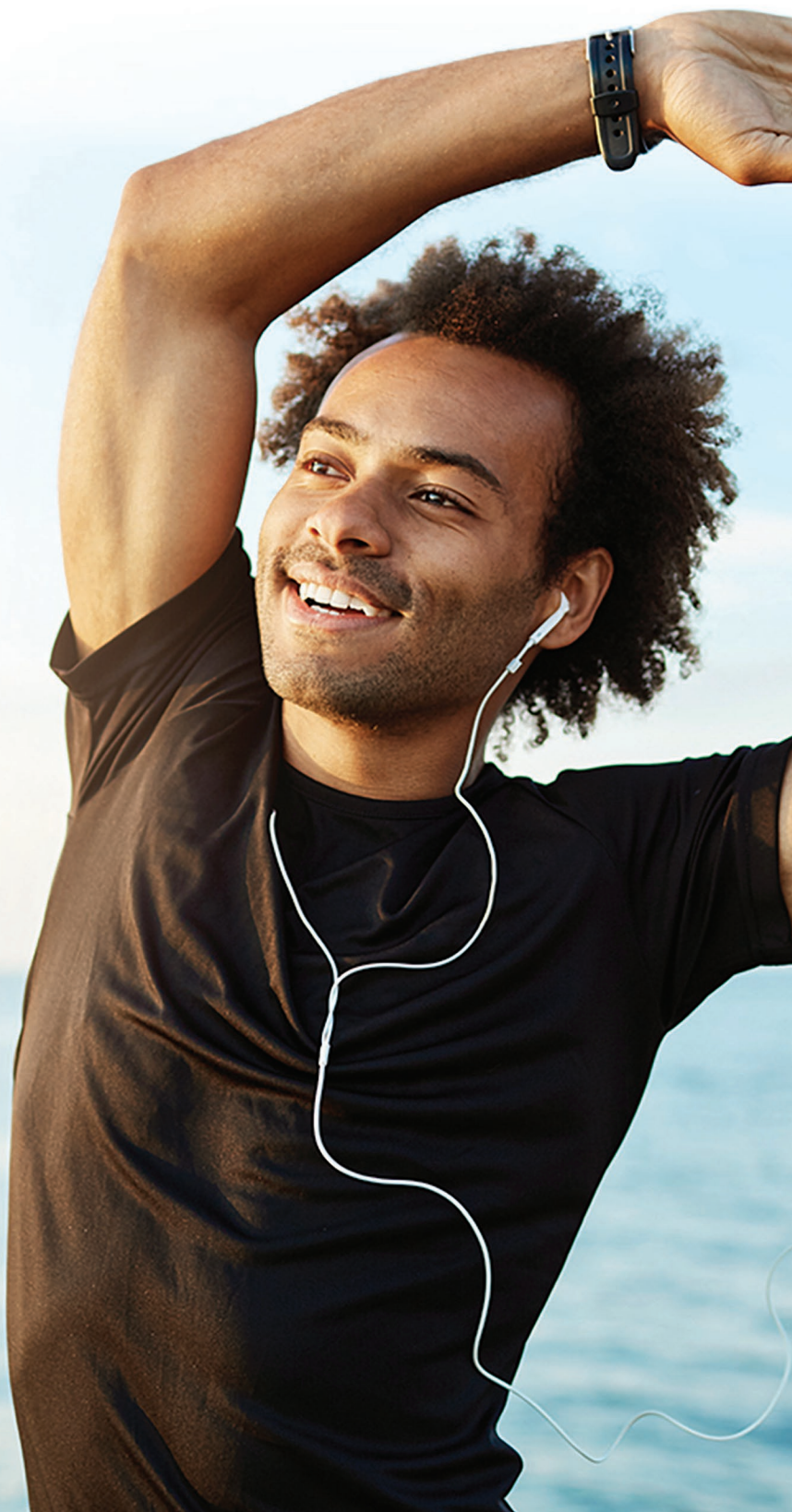
“I call it Mennonites-by-choice. I think that ethnic Mennonites have to be Mennonites-by-choice. For people who didn’t grow up Mennonite, there has to be a choice. That they say, ‘I choose to be Mennonite.’” — Daniel

“There are things I like that are very much ethnic Mennonite, but I don’t think that has anything to do with why I’m still part of the Mennonite Church. It is a faith community, and the ethnic piece of it has diluted in some ways the message that I think we’re trying to share. While the ethnic pieces of it, half of me, from my mom’s family, are really comforting and feel like home, I also recognize that another part of me is not welcome in some of those ethnic Mennonite settings because I’m not fully Mennonite.” — Declan

“People do think of themselves as ethnic Mennonites, and for a lot of people that means being practical, being frugal, valuing education and travel, and [belonging to] a faith community. But I personally don’t think that is who Mennonites are today. **I think Mennonites today are people who attend a Mennonite church, and they’re part of a Mennonite faith community.** I don’t want to say I resent the term *ethnic Mennonite*, but I just don’t find it helpful because it excludes people who weren’t raised in the Mennonite faith.” — Jude

“I think there is a challenge ahead for us, but an opportunity within that challenge to broaden our scope and relationship beyond just the ethnic background. **I think [the ethnic background] has been experienced as an exclusionary aspect of the Mennonite Church for people who have not grown up Mennonite.**”

— Patrice





In response to this inherent conflict, participants suggest that making concessions or changes to traditions may promote and support inclusive practices.

“Personally, I would really value having an experience that was influenced by other cultures and ideas. **And frankly, I might be happy to let some things [Mennonite traditions] go if it was for the sake of embracing and benefiting a diversity of cultures and voices within the church.**” — Aimee

“**When it comes to MC USA, I think there are key conversations that are being had and that need to continue to be had about both what it means to be ethnic cultural Mennonite and the ways that erases the experience of folks who didn’t grow up that way and found the faith later.** I think often ethnic Mennonite is tied to white Mennonite, and [it’s] important that we separate that out and acknowledge the harm that’s caused because there are lots of folks who identify with the ethnic cultural Mennonite identities. . . . And something that’s really important to me as a modern-day, nontraditional Mennonite, nonconservative Mennonite, is that there are ways that folks can join the cultural, ethnic experience, being that of simple living of shared values of this nonviolent peacemaker way of being, [even if] they didn’t grow up with German Swiss ancestry.” —Bella

“Can we make space in our congregation for multiple cultures in an intercultural way with give and take, rather than saying you have to become [specific ethnicity]?” — Derrick

“I think it’s also super important for us as a church to acknowledge that the things we think of as Mennonite culture are really sort of these white, maybe more rural, more connected to people with this Mennonite family history things. And if we position that as the Mennonite culture, then that’s really exclusionary to people who don’t fit into that background. **I think it’s important for our church to recognize the diversity of Mennonite backgrounds and cultures.**” — Alex

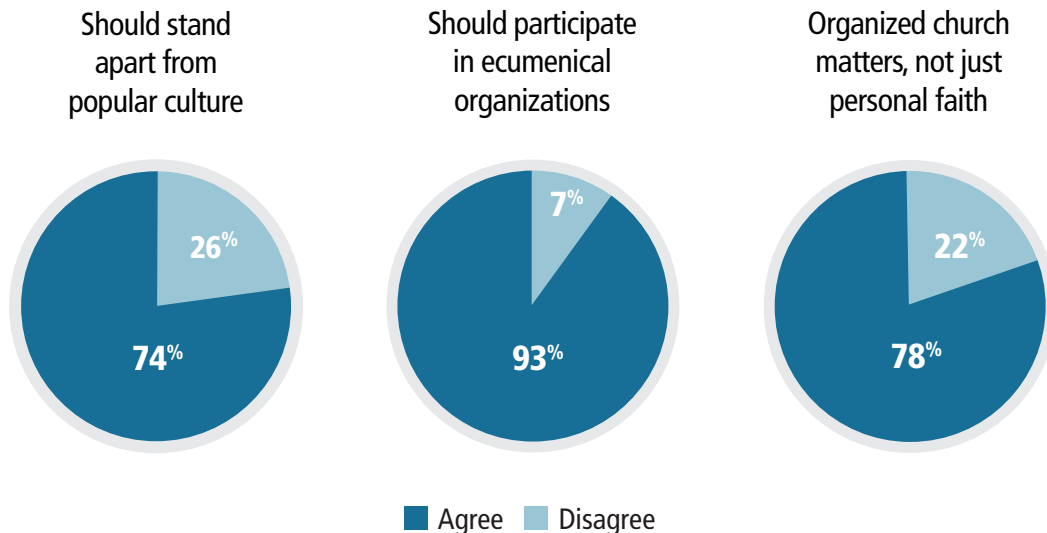
The Denomination

The theme of inclusion continues as we explore how participants think Mennonites should and do show up in the world as a denomination. They agree that their collective outward identity should reflect the core tenets of the faith and that it should embody the life of Jesus. In the same way that participants demonstrate their reverence for and value of traditions and history when they talk about the individual identity of the Mennonite, they reflect that as they talk about the faith generally. They share that traditions matter but should not be the primary focus because that alienates their relationships with other denominations. Additionally, traditions make being Mennonite unique and set them apart from popular culture in a meaningful way.



Members want the Mennonite Church to show up in the world through faith connections without getting caught up in secular concerns. Most members (74%) agree that the church should clearly stand apart from popular culture. Just over half (58%) agree that Old Order groups, such as the Amish, provide an important Christian witness in modern society.

Mennonite Faith in the Larger World



Interviewees emphasize that standing apart from popular culture means not necessarily being removed from it, but rather having an impact on the world by following Jesus, even if that's not popular.

“My faith calls me to seek the dignity of all people, to seek justice for the vulnerable and the underdog. **So, as we become aware of an issue of injustice, then we do our best to respond; we look at how Jesus responded.**” — Kris

“I think that separateness from the world, avoiding the Christian nationalism kind of thing, and putting Jesus front and center is what connects me most to the Mennonite Church.” — Liam

“One of the reasons I became a denominational person, which I never was before, was because I felt like MC USA was brave and faithful to Scripture by saying, ‘Look, we know this is not popular, but we think it’s right.’ So, my feelings would be that MC USA should prayerfully consider what human rights look like and then make a stance about that. I think that that would be a time when we would say, ‘Okay, this is our line in the sand.’” — Abbie

Working Together

Participants indicate that working with other denominations and maintaining interdenominational relationships help create unity and community. Participants acknowledge that although they connect with the Mennonite denomination deeply, collaboration and cohesion with others benefits them all, and society at large. There is almost unanimous agreement (93%) that Mennonites should participate in the ecumenical organizations of the broader Christian congregations, and 78% agree that organized church, regardless of the denomination, matters, and not just personal faith.

“If you don’t have denominations, you just have lots of different kinds of Christians, which is not a bad thing. I’ve learned that it’s really valuable to work more on the ecumenical kind of relationships.” — Skylar

“I still feel like the Mennonite Church gave me faith, and so I want to be in conversation with them. I stay part of the denomination because I feel like I owe them to be part of the conversation and give back through leadership when I can.” — Morgan

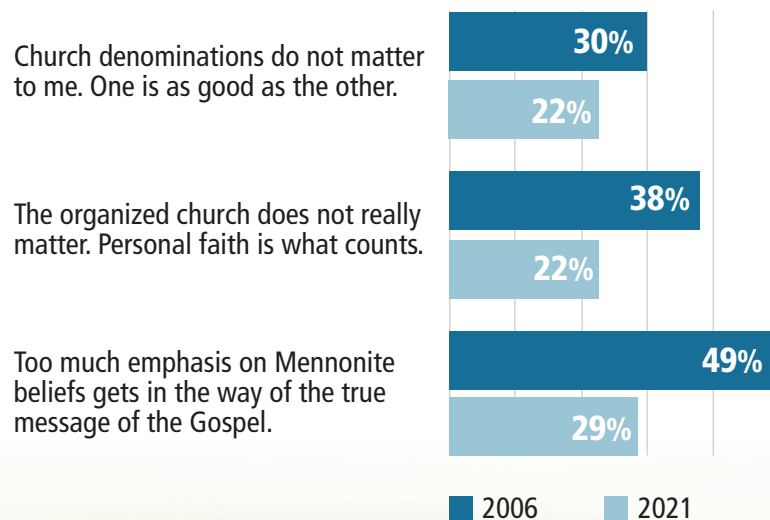




“I think it’s important for the denomination to focus on those things that we do hold in common, and what distinguishes us from other denominations in some ways. At the same time, I will say to continue to work at ecumenical kinds of relationships. So, it’s good to know who we are and how we’re different but also to recognize that we need each other, other denominations as well. And we can learn from other denominations.” — Nash

Despite a desire for interdenominational connections, MC USA members indicate that not all denominations meet their faith needs: 78% say that denominations matter, and one is not as good as another, and 61% believe that Mennonite teachings more accurately reflect the Word of God than the teachings of any other denomination. Additionally, members in 2021 had lower levels of agreement than those in 2006 about whether the church matters as much as personal faith (22% vs. 38%) and if Mennonite beliefs get in the way of the true message of the Gospel (49% vs. 29%).

Changes in Agreement with Denomination-Based Statements





The recognition that not all denominations are the same is echoed in follow-up interviews, which emphasize that a Mennonite church is the place members feel the presence of a higher power and where they feel “home.”

“We were looking for a new church. One Sunday we saw a Mennonite church, and it had a cross out front. So we assumed it must be Christian. That’s all we knew. **But I took one step in the door, and I had never experienced the presence of God before like I did that morning. And that morning transformed everything about me. I really met him just stepping literally into the building. They showed us what Christianity ought to look like, how it ought to be lived out.**” — Mitch



“The United States was a very new country for me because I’d never lived there. I spent 17 years in Romania. Being able to connect to a church, a family [with] similar values that I was already familiar with, made me feel like I had a place, even though I didn’t necessarily fit in. **And so being able to connect to a church was really what helped me feel like, ‘Oh, I do have an identity here.’ And now I’d say I’m pretty committed. I’m not leaving anytime soon, and so I want the best for MC USA, especially.** But also, I will pretty bluntly say that, you know, institutions are great, but they are not everything.” — Toni

“[In Western Buddhism], you have that kind of intentionality of a way of living your life and having it be part of everything that you do. And, it was synchronicity, God moments, whatever you want to call it, like, ‘Oh, I’m having these thoughts.’ **And I drive past the building, and I’ve never read the sign. And the sign says, ‘Mennonites meet here.’ And so I one day just went and felt at home in a way that I don’t find in many spaces.**” — Diane



A majority of participants regard the Mennonite denomination as better than others, but many share that Mennonite values are what matter the most. Essentially, participants share that they would be drawn to those values regardless of the other aspects of the denomination. Bella, a young Mennonite interview participant, captures this sentiment perfectly:

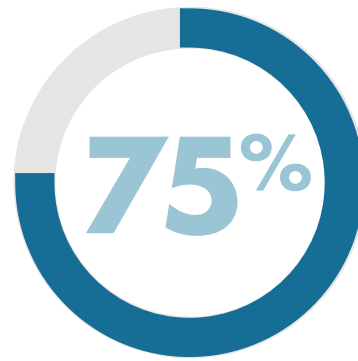
“I think that I can identify as Mennonite based on shared values and community experiences, and it doesn’t have a huge impact on my life. . . . I think, in talking to my current peers, . . . what keeps us here and draws us here is the community-based care, the radical love, the pacifism, the simple living, and the back-to-the-earth phenomenon.” — Bella

Spiritually

Commitment to religious beliefs and living out their faith are important to MC USA members. The majority (55%) say their religious beliefs are very important, and 29% say their religious beliefs are the most important thing in their life. In terms of a personal relationship with Christ, 43% of respondents say that relationship is the centerpiece of their faith story, and 41% say it is one part of their faith story.



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of MC USA members indicate that the most important reason for peacemaking was Jesus' life and teaching as a peacemaker.

Mennonites continue to connect peacemaking with living like Jesus did. Identical to Kanagy's (2007) findings, three-quarters (75%) of MC USA members indicate that the most important reason for peacemaking is Jesus' life and teaching as a peacemaker. Other reasons for peacemaking include the theme of reconciliation in biblical teaching (10%) and the reality that violence is not effective (9%). Although there is consensus among MC USA members on the importance of religious beliefs and living out one's faith, these things manifest differently among congregations and sometimes lead to tensions.

Participants recognize the shifting trends in the denomination and the disconnect that can cause.

“We need to focus on our core beliefs, and they need to be kind of broad and allow for that to be manifested in different ways, in different places, and in different types of groups.” — Jessie

“I do think that MC USA has a tendency to [focus] so hard on the . . . social justice kind of issues that we sometimes forget that we are a faith community or forget to talk about Jesus because we’re so focused on like all of these social issues.” — Elee





“The issues that we have, all those issues, are symptoms of how we read the Scriptures. And I think we need to have some real integrity and honest, open, not so much teaching, but discussion on how we approach Scripture.” — Bill

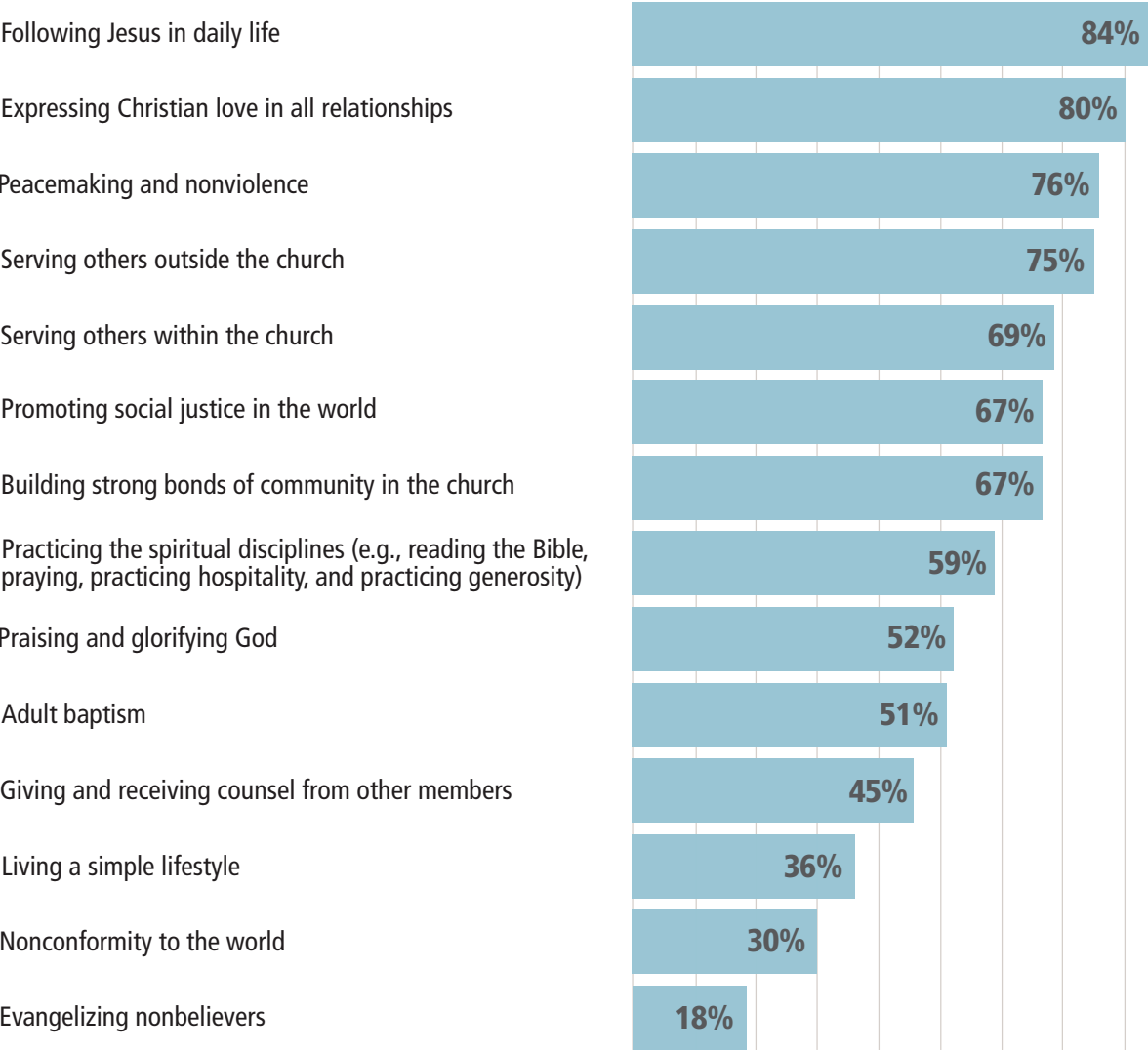
“It’s a time of shifting, a time of choosing, a time of remaking who the denomination is, and there’s part of me that really laments the losses that we’ve experienced. As one who identifies more on the progressive side, I also am grateful that denominational leadership is becoming more open to the differences amongst conferences and the differences amongst congregations, and that tends to sit better with me, with my policy, with my understanding of what it means to be a Mennonite church: **That not everything has to be in alignment and agreement, but that we hold these common beliefs and values together, knowing that they will be lived out in different ways, depending on where you’re living.**” — Nash

When describing what it means to be Mennonite, members typically point to the tenets of the faith that center around nonviolence, community, and living out their faith. Most MC USA members identify following Jesus in daily life (84%) and expressing Christian love in all relationships (80%) as important personal faith commitments. This is followed by three-quarters of participants (76%) indicating that peacemaking and nonviolence and serving others outside the church (75%) are important personal faith commitments.

Other personal faith commitments a majority of members find important include serving others within the church (69%), building strong bonds of community in the church (67%), promoting social justice in the world (67%), practicing the spiritual disciplines (59%), praising and glorifying God (52%), and adult baptism (51%). The least important personal faith commitments for MC USA survey respondents are giving and receiving counsel from other members (45%), living a simple lifestyle (36%), nonconformity to the world (30%), and evangelizing nonbelievers (18%).

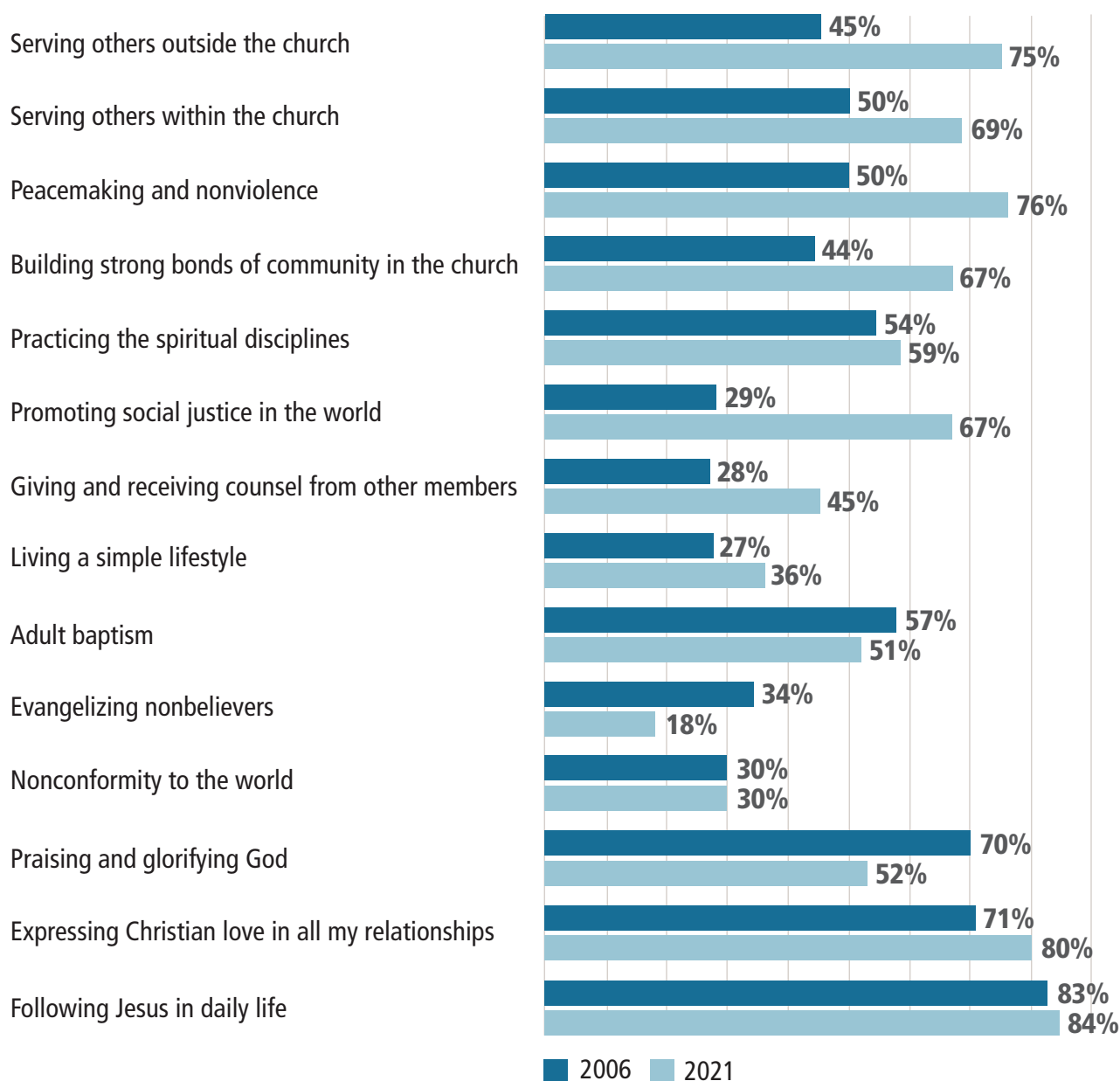
Personal Faith Commitments

Selected “Very Important”



There is a shift in these responses between 2006 and 2021. Participants in this study agree more often with statements about relationships and community than they did in 2006. In some cases, such as “importance of peacemaking and nonviolence,” 76% of 2021 participants agree versus only 50% of 2006 participants. The largest difference between then and now is in the percentage of participants who agree that “promoting social justice in the world” is important (29% in 2006 and 67% in 2021: a 38% increase).

Changes in the Importance of Statements to Faith



Follow-up interviews echo the importance of peace, community, and living like Jesus as foundational to being Mennonite.

“For me being a Mennonite means following the way of Jesus and living out a life that reflects peace and nonviolence. [Those] are the two big ones that I’m looking for in a faith. I did grow up a very conservative, extremely conservative Mennonite, and what I did not value in the Mennonite [Church] was the conservative aspect of it. What I did value was the peace and nonviolence. That is what I see so strongly taught in the Mennonites. And so, it was from that that I wanted to stay Mennonite.” — Monica

“So, I can say to you that I think part of being a Mennonite is wanting social justice for all. So, I think that’s another thing about being a Mennonite. It says we have to keep . . . our eyes open. We have to see the world as it is. **There is a lot of bigotry, and there is a lot of injustice, and we have to do what we can in our own way to address it, whatever that might be, using the talents that we have.**” — Marge

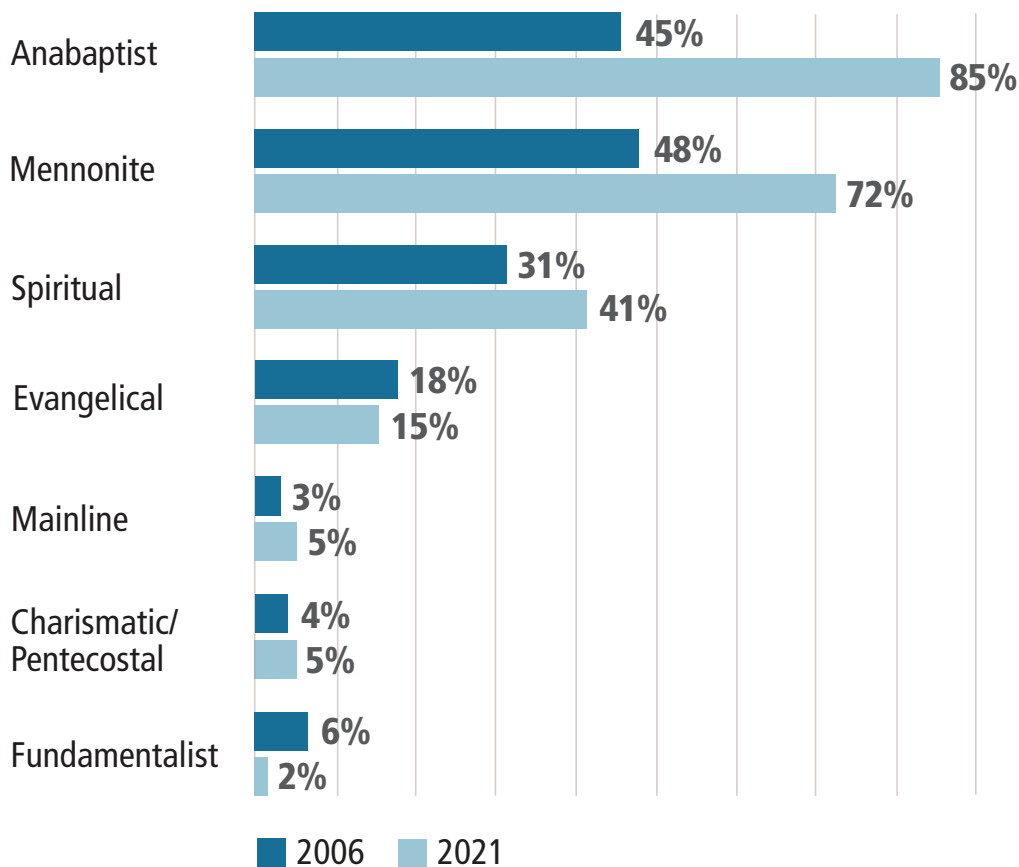
“Being a Mennonite in my mind usually manifests more as a set of cultural and social practices, more so than religious doctrine. **I would say that as a subset of sort of Anabaptist Christianity, there’s not a lot of things for me, religiously, that differentiate Mennonites. It’s more the social aspect of things—community, pacifism. I mean, those are the broad ones.**” — Benjamin



“[Being Mennonite is] about the community atmosphere. It’s about the rituals that we do together, the rituals of adult baptism, the rituals of hymn singing, the rituals of communion, and so forth, so that community aspect at church. It’s also about that community aspect of fellowship, about the potlucks and the hymn sings, and all the social things that we used to do together.” — Ron

Since 2006, MC USA members appear to be using more designations to describe their religious beliefs. Among current MC USA members, Anabaptist (85%) and Mennonite (72%) are used most often to describe their religious beliefs. Additional designations for participants’ religious beliefs include Spiritual (41%), Evangelical (15%), Radical (13%), Other (12%), Mainline Protestant (5%), Agnostic (5%), Charismatic/Pentecostal (5%), Pietist (3%), Fundamentalist (2%). There was no comparative data from 2006 for the Radical, Other, Agnostic, or Pietist categories, so they are not represented on the chart below.

Religious Identities of Members over Time



Follow-up interviews emphasize that despite MC USA members appreciating denominational connections, labeling their religious beliefs under smaller designations can be difficult, and often multiple classifications are used (and sometimes interchangeably).

“That may be part of why I didn’t necessarily want to be associated with Mennonite when I was little, and thinking we’re all broadly Christian because the idea of an ethnic Mennonite, there can be a lot of [typecasts]. **I guess I wanted it to be understood that I wasn’t seeing my faith as something that was purely a result of my background. So as a way of claiming it more personally, I think I dissociated, or didn’t want to attach myself tightly with being Mennonite.**” — Melanie

“So, I use [*Mennonite* and *Anabaptist*] interchangeably in terms of my own thoughts about my identity, but I normally will say I’m a Mennonite whenever I’m part of organizations or in any situation that people are interested in how I identify myself.” — Jim

“In seminary, I used the term *Anabaptist-Mennonite*, and I hyphenated it because it was confusing when talking to people outside of the Mennonite-Anabaptist Church. But, at least from my perspective and what I’ve seen in the States, saying, ‘I’m a Mennonite’ didn’t really, especially when I was in college, mean much for people. Like some of my friends would say, ‘Oh yeah, I’m a Mennonite.’ And I would ask them, ‘Well, what does that mean for you?’ And they would say, ‘Well, I was born in a Mennonite family. I have a Mennonite last name.’” — Toni

“I guess when I am in a context where it’s much larger, perhaps less familiar, I tend to use them as interchangeable. I use both terms hoping that one will connect with someone. I admit my circles are predominantly Mennonite, and so I don’t often have those opportunities. And so much of my time is here at the church or with the larger conference. I guess I tend to use *Mennonite* a little bit more, but I see them as both very positive things and both ones that I would use when speaking to other people.” — Katelyn

“I vacillate on whether I prefer the term *Mennonite* or *Anabaptist*. I think to some extent claiming the title *Anabaptist* maybe widens the umbrella a little bit to perhaps include a few more that I don’t know that the title *Mennonite* always does. **I think sometimes the title *Mennonite* can signal certain ethnic issues, whereas *Anabaptist*, I think, can often signal perhaps larger theological connections.** And so, . . . especially for me as somebody who is not ethnically Mennonite, there are ways that I have experienced the title *Mennonite* as being somewhat exclusive.” — Tiffany

“For me being a Mennonite means following the way of Jesus and living out a life that reflects peace and nonviolence. [Those] are the two big ones that I’m looking for in a faith.” — Monica



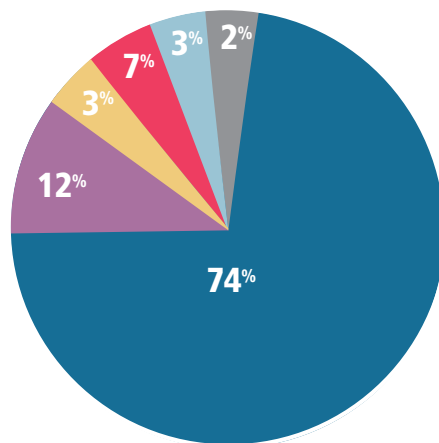
Chapter 3: Discover Current Members' Experiences and Understanding of MC USA

In addition to exploring the nuance and dimensions of the Mennonite identity, participant experiences with MC USA congregations and the organization at large inform how congregations align with participants' expectations of the denomination and how faith lives are fostered and supported by those congregations. Additionally, this chapter explores the ways and frequency with which participants engage with unique MC USA offerings.

At the Congregational Level

Participants share how their congregation engages with the surrounding community and how their congregation impacts their personal and faith lives. Congregations affiliated with MC USA provide ample support to members and the surrounding community. Generally, members see their congregation as a positive force in the community, and they feel safe and at home there. Around three-quarters of members (74%) have witnessed the local church helping people with real needs. Another 12% have been the recipients of help from the local church when they needed it. Only 3% of participants feel that when they or others they knew experienced a major need nobody in the congregation noticed.

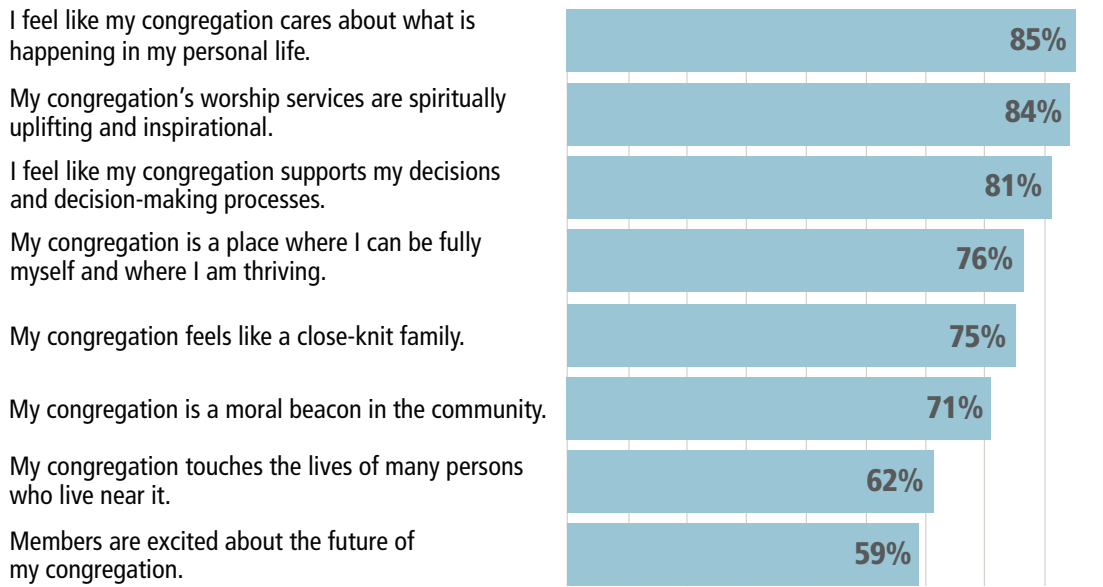
Local Churches' Responses to Major Needs of Congregants



- Yes, I've seen the local church help people with real needs.
- Yes, I've been the recipient of help from the local church when I needed it.
- I've heard the pastor express a desire to help congregants.
- I'm unsure.
- No, I've experienced a major need, or seen others with needs, and felt that nobody noticed.
- Not applicable

Congregations are a place of safety and hope for members. Most survey participants (85%) agree that their congregation cares about what is happening in their personal lives and is supportive of their decisions (81%). They share that their congregation is a place where they can be fully themselves and are thriving (76%). Furthermore, three-quarters of participants say they see their local congregation as a moral beacon for the community (71%) and believe their congregation touches the lives of many who live nearby (62%).

Perceptions of My Congregation

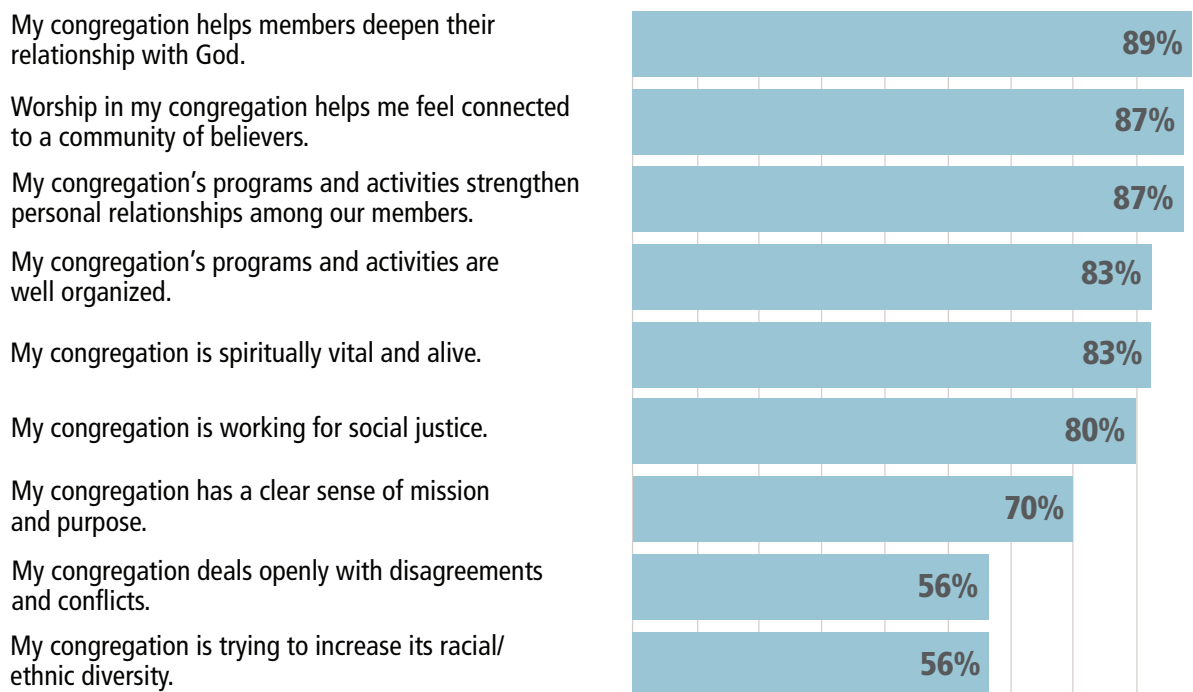


MC USA members share that their congregations help them strengthen their faith through connection, education, and missional engagement. Most participants (89%) agree that their congregation helps members deepen their relationship with God and helps them feel connected to a community of believers (87%). Current members also indicate that their congregation strengthens personal relationships among members (87%) and feels like a close-knit family (75%).

Participants also agree that their church has worship services that are spiritually uplifting and inspirational (84%), teaches and learns Anabaptist/Mennonite theology (83%), studies the Bible together (83%), and discerns matters of life together through study and prayer (78%). Current members also suggest that their congregation has programs and activities that are well organized (83%), is spiritually vital and alive (83%), is working for social justice (80%), and has a clear sense of mission and purpose (70%).

In fact, participants largely speak positively about their congregations and indicate they have a good experience. In fact, participants indicate less agreement on only two measures. Just over half (56%) agree that their congregation is trying to increase its racial/ethnic diversity and that their congregation deals openly with disagreements and conflicts. This difference is not surprising considering these are areas that came up throughout the study as needing improvement.

Perceptions of My Congregation



Largely, members feel supported and well resourced, even with difficult topics and conflict. In follow-up interviews, members emphasize the importance of resources the denomination offers when supporting local initiatives. Resources typically take the form of financial support (e.g., grants), training opportunities to improve lay leadership skills (e.g., conflict management), and educational materials for local congregations (e.g., Sunday school coursework).

“I really affirm and appreciate things like the materials that are available for children’s Sunday school classes, that kind of thing. It’s wonderful. I love it. The resources that they have I think are invaluable. And I really affirm what they’re doing in trying to help people on their faith journey. It’s not an easy task that the leadership has. I don’t have a critique at this point. I would affirm what they are doing because as a woman I have never felt the affirmation in any other Mennonite denomination. That’s what I have felt here.” — Monica

“I like that there are resources that are pertinent to the challenges that we face right now. With immigration, with anti-racism stuff, policing, I think that’s really important. How does our faith speak to the difficult matters of our time? Just keep doing that. Those are the kinds of resources that we need. The publishing house still is turning out really good stuff. That’s so important to us. Just stay relevant, stay key. Show us what it means to explore the fullness of the Gospel in other facets of life.” — Liam





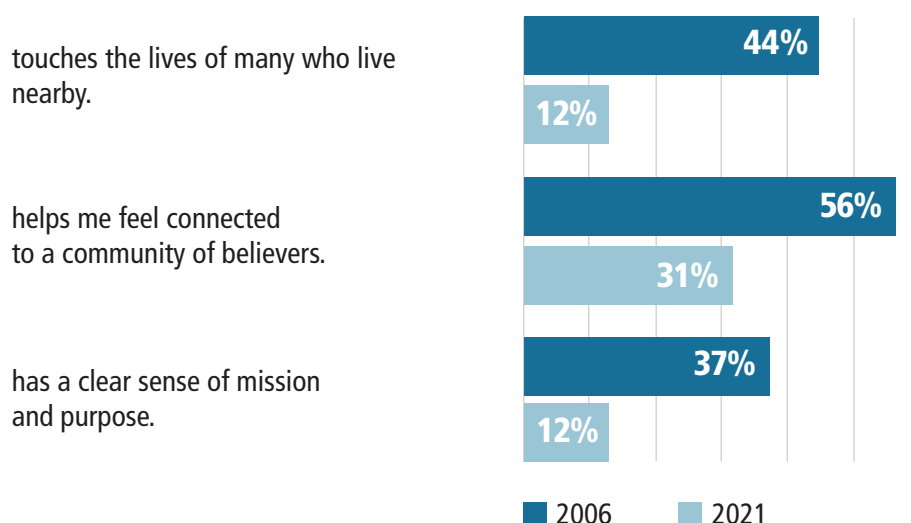
“I think the whole resourcing, being a resource, a place to go for resources, best practices, I think the denomination needs to continue to do that. Frankly, that’s where I think it needs to spend its time and money and focus because the hot button stuff will bubble up. **I think it’s fine if delegates want to bring resolutions about whatever’s going on in society and our response to it, but I think it’s more important that our leaders be focused on offering resources.**” — Kris

“One of the things I thought Mennonite USA might do very well to start is helping [financially] more of its little denominations who are trying to accomplish these social justice projects. I have not really found any grants through Mennonite USA. Maybe there’s something called a seed grant. But to get grants for us to repair our building showers, add a laundry facility, fix the kitchen, because we are serving a lot of people. **I would love for there to be actual grants that Mennonite USA provides or assistance to find grants. People at Mennonite USA say, ‘Hey, have you considered this organization, or have you considered that?’ Because I actually did reach out to them, and they didn’t really know.**” — Marge

“It is helpful to have a place for resources for congregations. So, I know that the pastor at my current church does a lot of work with folks at the conference office as far as getting resources from them; they helped us recently find a new pastor for our church. So, I think that’s really key. And then interacting with other churches at our conference has been a really positive experience. **And then just having some kind of guidelines when there are maybe disagreements or things that we can sort of look to the denomination to see how to handle things like that.**” — Elee

Although participants are generally content with their experience in their local congregations, a closer look indicates there has been a rather large drop from 2006 to 2021 in the percentage of current members who agree with a handful of statements related to community engagement at the local level.

My Congregation . . .



Follow-up interviews suggest that a key factor in this decline may be related to a perceived lack of support and guidance coming from the larger church structure.

“I personally feel like we spend a lot of time with issues, and that pushes us to be very political as a denomination. My hope would be that congregations would have an opportunity to relate to folks that come to their doors, and we’d have that freedom to sort of figure out for ourselves some of the nuance within the congregation. And at the denominational level that there not be as much involvement in the politics of things, but more guidance on how to be faithful in the current spiritual and historic reality.” — Declan

“I think people . . . especially who’ve been part of a Mennonite church for 40 or 50 years or more, feel like their voices, because they’re a part of a particular conference within MC USA, are heard less than other conferences are. **And I think as a denomination, as a conference, an MC USA body, there’s a lot that you can do to address that. I mean, it’s not really hard to invite people to conversation, at least to feel heard, at least to feel known.** And I think that’s something that MC USA can be more proactive about doing.” — Rhys

“I think leadership needs to find ways to encourage congregations to look at the talents, the abilities, the callings, and the interests they have within the congregation, and find ways to develop them and experience those. If one person has a calling, and good things happen, energy happens from that. There’s connection there, and I think we must pay attention to and encourage those actions to take place.” — Bill





In terms of power and leadership, members indicate that shared responsibility is at the center of their local congregations, and their congregations are working toward being innovative. Most participants (84%) indicate that local congregations share power in decision-making and are open to new ideas, insights, and input from multiple sources, rather than having power focused on a small group of individuals (77%). Just over two-thirds of participants indicate that their congregation has members who are excited about the future of the congregation (69%) and who welcome innovation and change (68%).

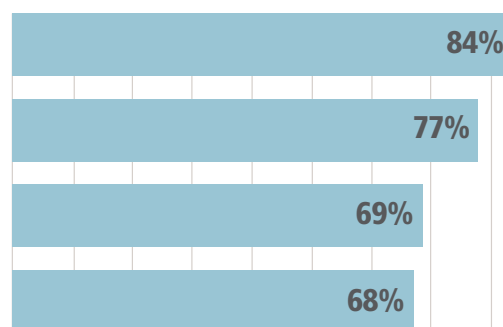
My Congregation . . .

shares power in decision-making.

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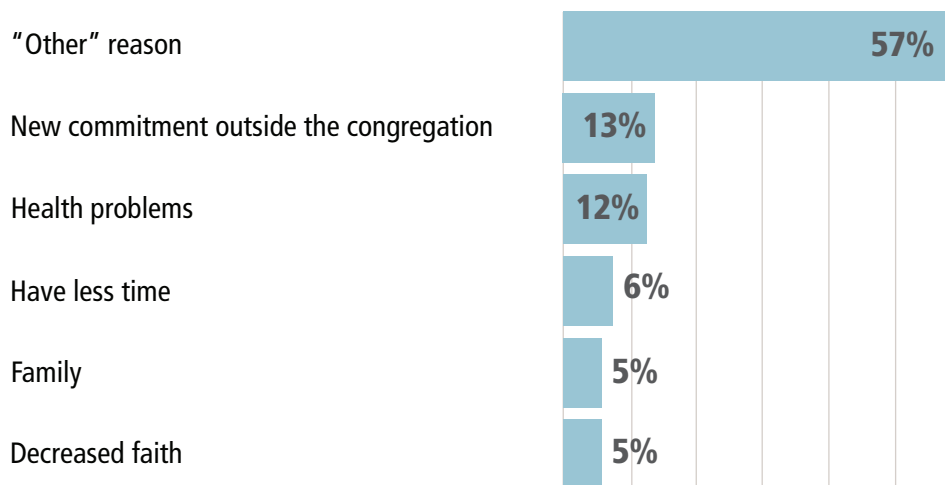
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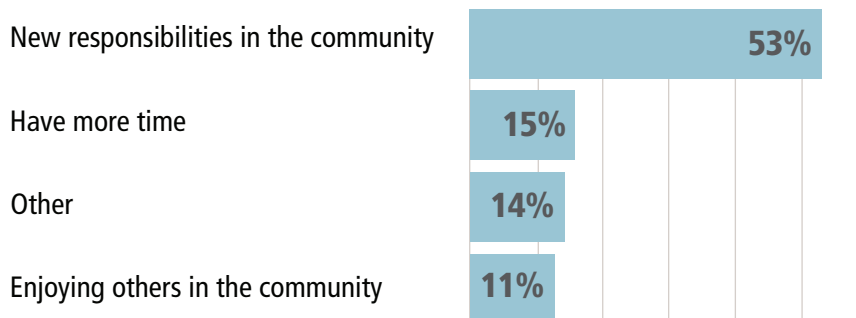
COVID-19

Notwithstanding the impact of COVID-19, most members' involvement in local congregations has stayed the same (61%), followed by 25% indicating their involvement decreased, and 15% suggesting their involvement has increased. Of those who decreased their involvement, most indicated "other reason" (57%), having a new commitment outside the congregation (13%), and having health problems (12%) as their reasons. Additional factors leading to decreased attendance include having less time (6%), family (5%), and decreased faith (5%). New responsibilities in the community (53%), having more time (15%), other (14%), and enjoying others in the community (11%) all contributed to increased congregational involvement.

Reasons for Decreased Attendance

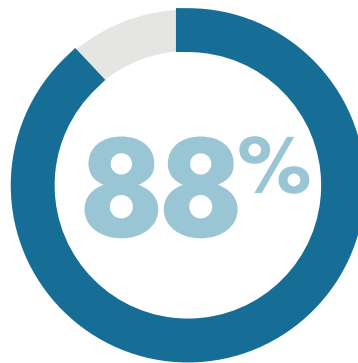


Reasons for Increased Congregational Involvement



The majority of MC USA members agree that their congregation has handled the COVID-19 crisis well (88%) and that they felt supported by their faith community during the pandemic (84%). Pre-pandemic, most participants (90%) attended services weekly or more; however, mid-pandemic attendance decreased 10 percentage points, with 80% of members attending virtual services once a week or more.

My congregation handled the COVID-19 crisis well.



At the Denominational Level

Mission

To determine how people experience the denomination at large, participants answered questions about different dimensions of MC USA, including questions about the mission, services, leadership, commitment to, and communication from MC USA.

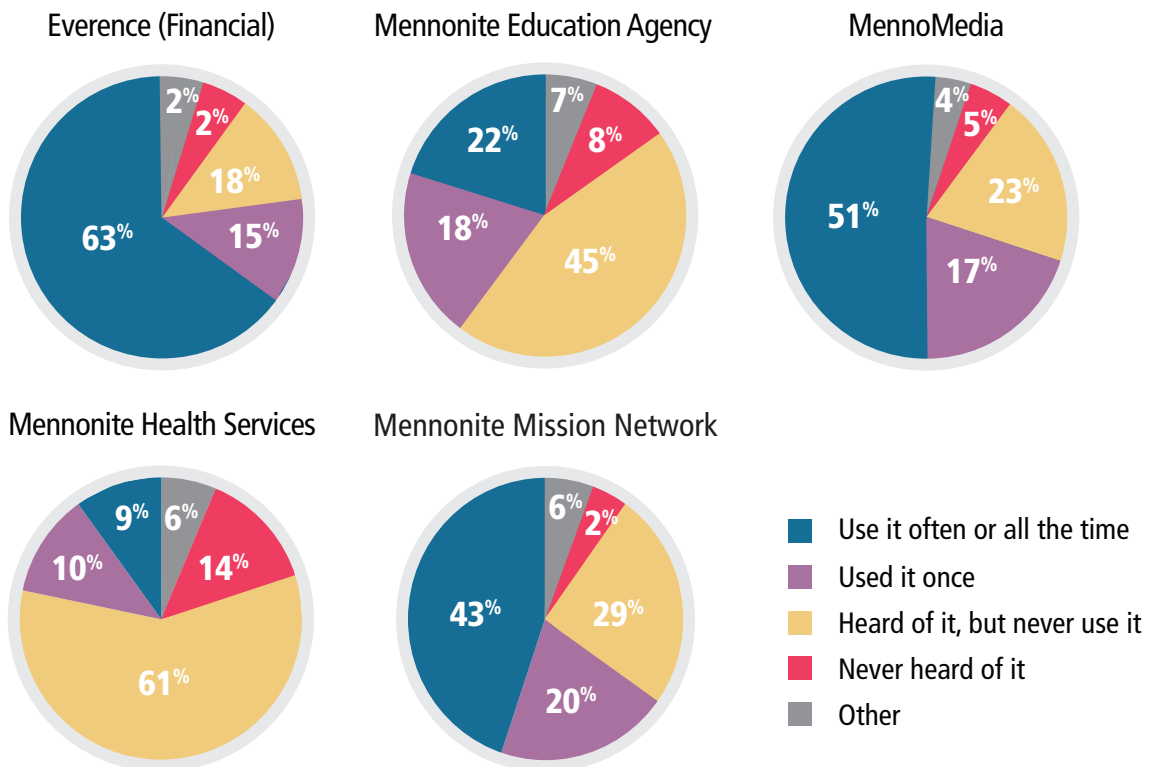
Largely, people are committed to the mission of the denomination. When asked about understanding the mission of MC USA, the majority of members (52%) indicate they relate to it well enough, with 63% agreeing that MC USA consistently promotes the missions of the denomination, and 74% indicating that it is important to them that their congregation is part of MC USA.



Agencies and Services

MC USA members are generally aware of various services offered by the denomination, but their use of these services varies. However, participants who do use services typically find them advantageous. Most participants (85% or more) are aware of Everence, Mennonite Education Agency, MennoMedia, Mennonite Health Services, and Mennonite Mission Network. The services many MC USA members use “often” or “all the time” are Everence (63%), MennoMedia (51%), and Mennonite Mission Network (43%). The opposite is true for Mennonite Education Agency and Mennonite Health Services; most members have heard of these organizations but have used them once at best. Over three-quarters of participants find Everence (84%), Mennonite Mission Network (82%), and MennoMedia (78%) useful. Furthermore, 60% of participants find Mennonite Education Agency useful, and another 28% say they “don’t know” about this organization’s usefulness. Only 47% of participants find Mennonite Health Services useful, and another 41% say they “don’t know” about this organization’s usefulness.

Frequency of Services Used



Current members are fairly evenly split about whether access to these services (e.g., MennoMedia and Everence) is important to them as they maintain their affiliation with the denomination. About one-third of participants agree that services are important for their continued membership with MC USA (30%), while 32% disagree that these services are important for continued association with the denomination. Another 37% of participants neither agreed nor disagreed about the importance of services for continued membership in MC USA. Follow-up interviews suggest that the MC USA program agencies and other affiliated organizations are an important feature of the denomination through which members find connection. For one-third of members (32%), access to these kinds of program agency services (e.g., MennoMedia and Everence) is important for their continued affiliation with the denomination.

“We just really appreciate the resources that are available, the curriculum that’s available. We often do book studies with the Herald Press or Mennonite Publishing. **I think that’s a part of who we are that is central, to be part of something larger and make these connections with other people who share similar beliefs has been important.**” — Katelyn

“I appreciate some of the work that MC USA does in other countries. I very much appreciate [our disaster response partnerships]. That’s really important to me. I very much appreciate the Mennonite publications, so those things are important to me as far as the denomination is concerned. Those are the things that I feel tie us together.” — Isabella



“[I participate] with Pink Menno, which is the LGBTQ-affirming Mennonite group, and they have a presence at MC USA conventions and things like that. And in those spaces, **I find the most relational work happening, and it tends to happen, I think, because the goal is community, and the goal is not institutional preservation.** The goal is how can we make people feel like they’re a part of this thing with us here.” — Bella

“If there’s not a Mennonite agency that is regularly publishing Anabaptist- or Mennonite-related Sunday school materials, then those materials come from larger organizations, which may be ecumenical, or they might be Methodist, or they might be Baptist, but they’re not Anabaptist. **And as a result, the teaching of our kids gets watered down by theology that is not always consistent with the Anabaptists’ understanding of things.**” — Kevin



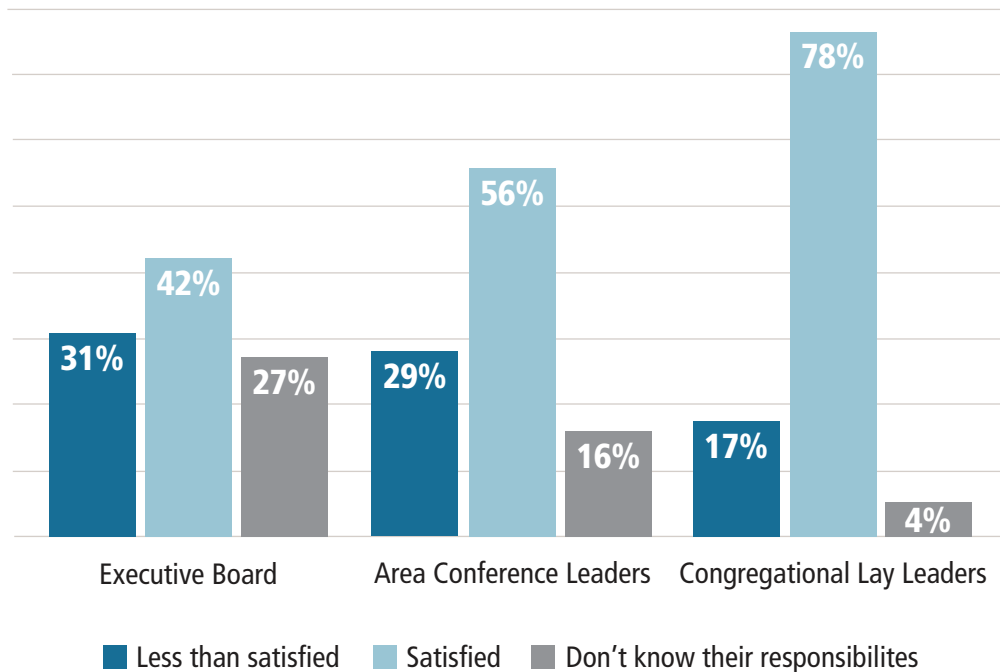


Leadership

Members have mixed satisfaction levels with different levels of leadership, though in some cases this could be explained by their lack of awareness about what the position is supposed to do. For example, the executive board has the lowest level of satisfaction (42% “satisfied” and “extremely satisfied”), and 27% say they don’t know the scope of responsibilities for the executive board. Members indicate higher satisfaction (56% “satisfied” and “extremely satisfied”) with area conference leaders, and only 16% are unaware of the responsibility of these leaders.

The most satisfaction is with congregational leadership. Only 17% of participants indicate they are less than satisfied (“not satisfied” and “somewhat satisfied”) with lay leadership, and only 4% of respondents are unaware of lay leaders’ responsibilities. Unsurprisingly, members are more likely to say they were satisfied with a leader if they had more encounters, or opportunities for encounters, with them.

Member Satisfaction Levels with MC USA Leadership



Follow-up interviews highlight experiences through which current MC USA members come to their understandings of leadership at different organizational levels.

“From my vantage point [as a conference delegate], I think the leadership was not strong enough to say, ‘Here are the parameters of how we’re going to operate, and this is how we’re going to discuss how we’re going to do discourse. And this is acceptable behavior, and this isn’t, this is not an acceptable way to have that discourse.’ And I think that’s where they got off track, particularly with the LGBTQ issue. **Society is changing. I think we all recognize that. So, the way people would have viewed those issues 30, 40 years ago is different than they do today. However, I think the way it was it felt, it felt like bullying, and bullying was an accepted way to get your position.** So, it could have been handled completely differently, and I don’t think people recognize the trauma on both sides, and it always felt one-directional, with very few exceptions.” — Dean

“I think that the denomination at large is doing a great job. I mean, you look at the diversity in the leadership that we have—a diversity of race, diversity of names there. They’ve done a really good job of busting out of the Swiss German or Russian Mennonite mold. So, I really think the identity MC USA was already projecting out there has really gone away, and this is good, from the ethnic identity piece.” — Liam

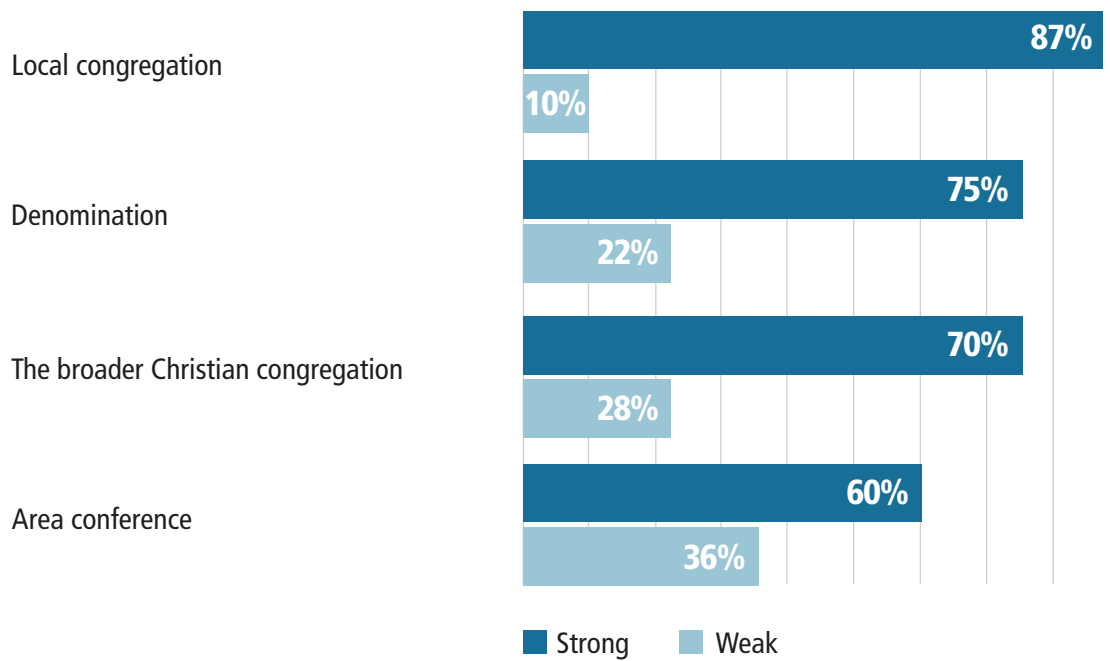
“I think leadership is doing a tremendous job, given the political climate of this country right now, given what is happening within the church itself, I’ve been very impressed and happy with where things are. And, at least speaking for myself, there’s nothing that springs to mind immediately in terms of what I would like to see done differently or done more of.” — Katelyn

“[The IDI training] was an experience I had recently that I would value more leadership go through in order to just become self-aware of how we live with our racial assumptions, ways of carrying and moving ourselves throughout the culture, around us, not only that, but how we move and live within the MC USA body as well.” — Patrice



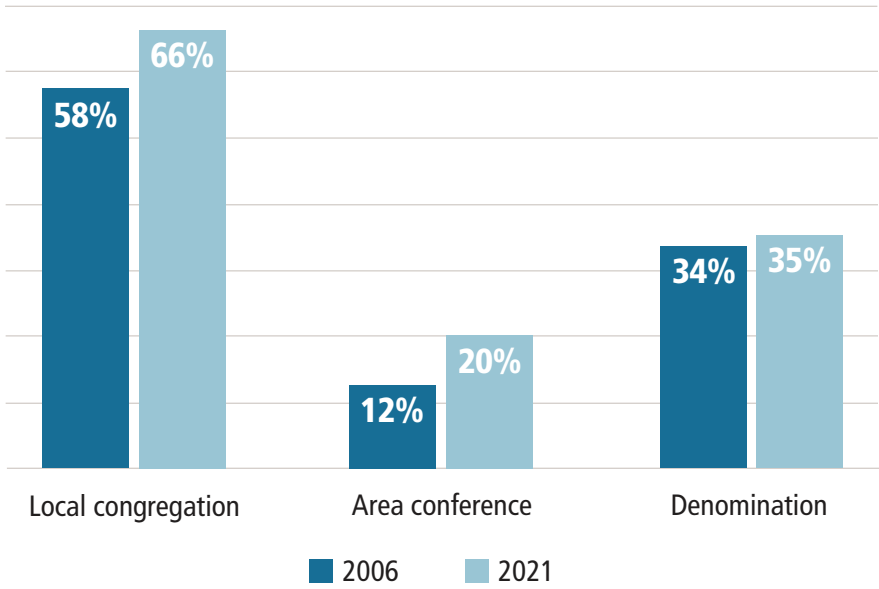
Unsurprisingly, current MC USA members also have mixed levels of personal commitment to different organizational bodies within the faith. Most participants indicate a strong tie with the local congregation (87%), followed by the denomination (75%), the broader Christian congregation (70%), and then the area conference (60%).

Commitment to Organizational Bodies within MC USA



Since 2006, there has been a slight increase in strong commitment to MC USA. In fact, there was nearly a 10% increase in members’ “very strong” commitment to their local congregations.

**Changes in Members’
Personal Commitment to MC USA**



Communication

Members indicate that they prefer communications through newsletters or personal emails (91%), mailed letters or flyers (35%), and text messages (28%). Blogs (14%), an updated website calendar (13%), and phone calls (11%) are the least selected communication options. When asked about communications with the executive board, over one-third (37%) of participants suggest that they don’t get communications from the executive board, and around one-quarter (29%) indicate that messages from the executive board are useful, but almost the same percentage (27%) say they don’t understand what the executive board is trying to do with communication. Only 3% of participants suggest communications from the executive board are useless, and 1% find these communications to be overwhelming.

