

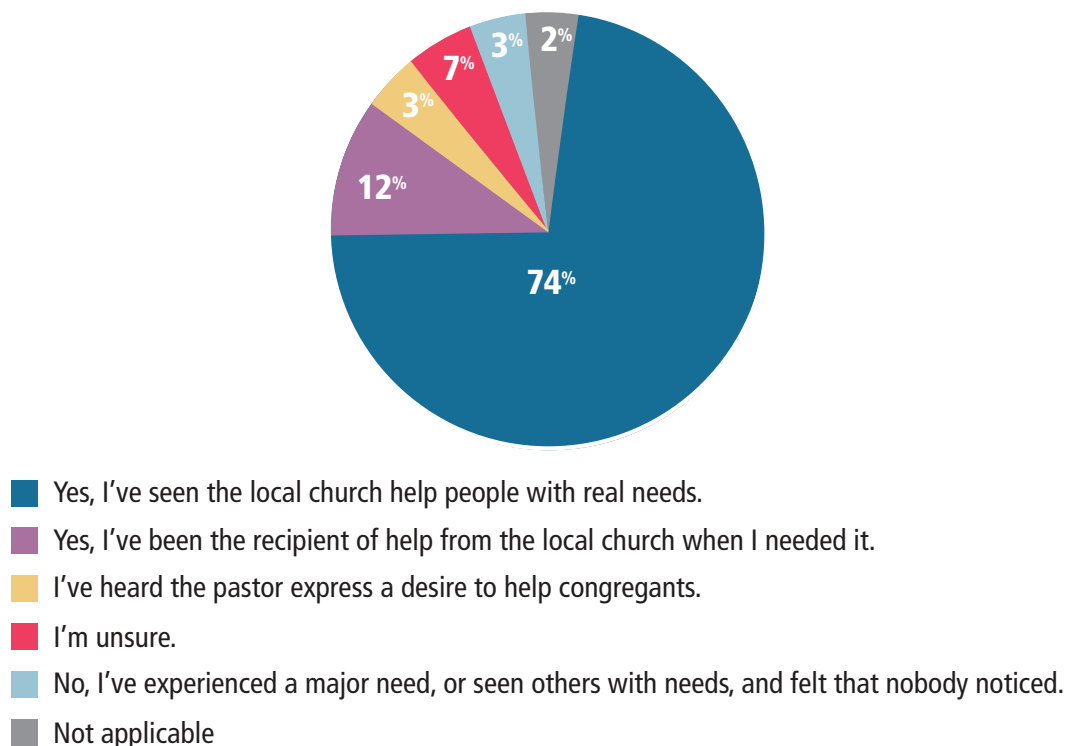
## Chapter 3: Discover Current Members' Experiences and Understanding of MC USA

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

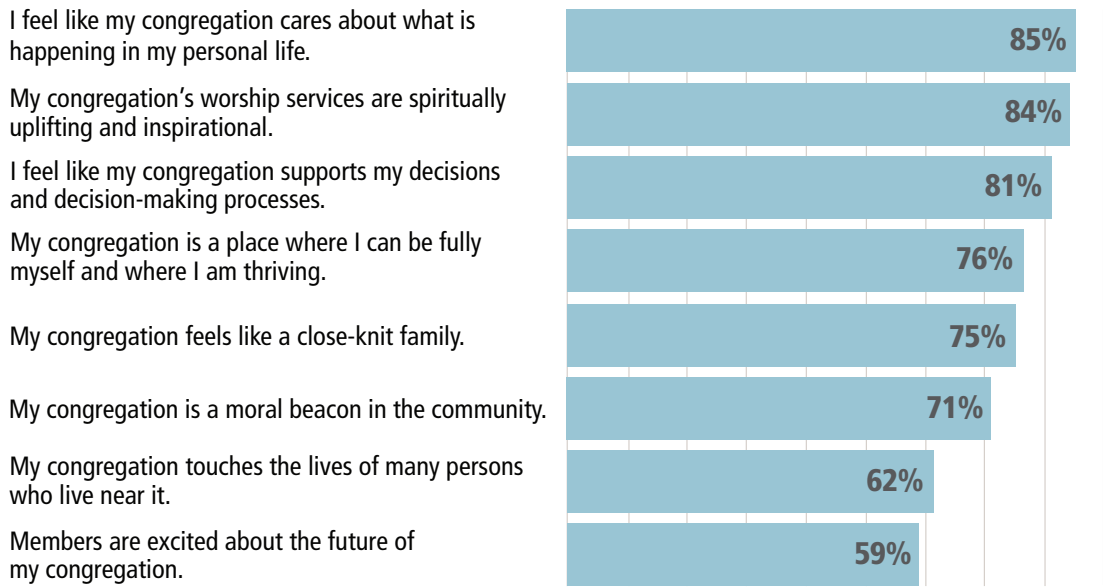
Participants share how their congregation engages with the surrounding community and how their congregation impacts their personal and faith lives. Congregations affiliated with MC USA provide ample support to members and the surrounding community. Generally, members see their congregation as a positive 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**



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

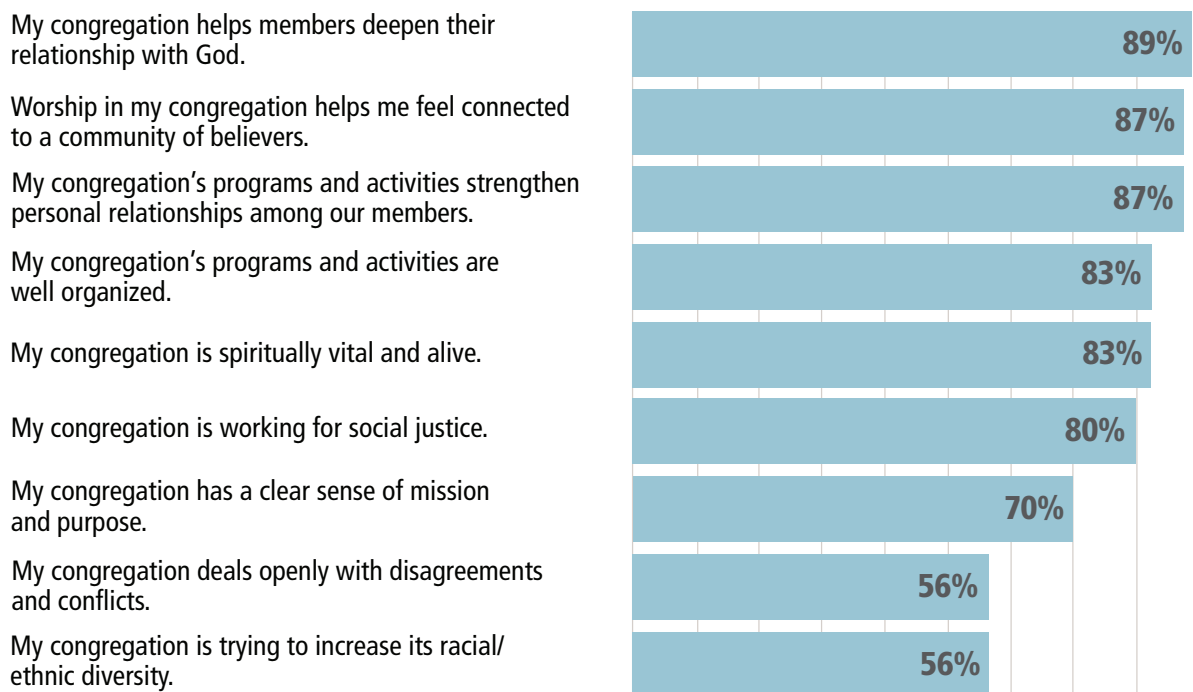


MC USA members share that their congregations help them strengthen their faith through connection, education, and missional engagement. Most participants (89%) agree that their congregation helps members deepen their relationship with God and helps them feel connected to a community of believers (87%). 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





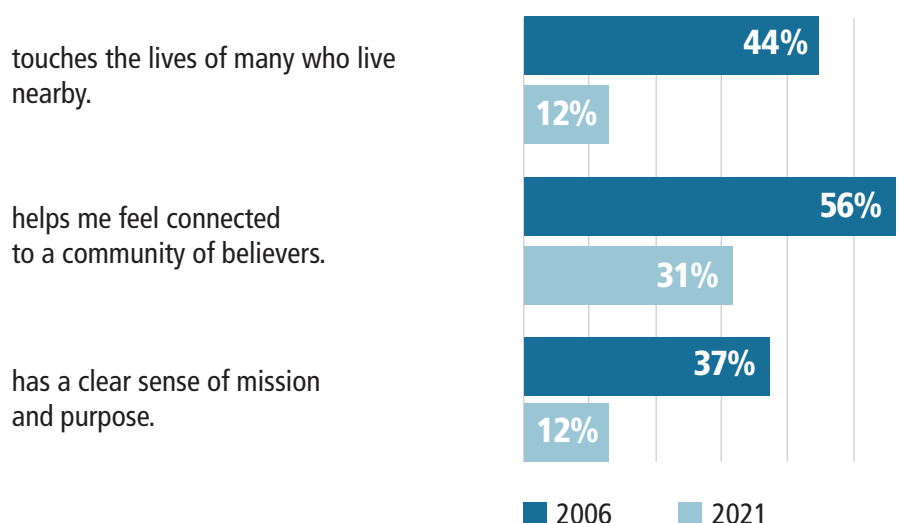
“I think the whole resourcing, being a resource, a place to go for resources, best practices, I think the denomination needs to continue to do that. Frankly, that’s where I think it needs to spend its time and money and focus because the hot button stuff will bubble up. **I think it’s fine if delegates 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%).

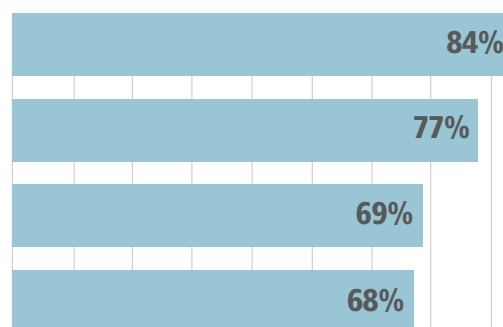
### My Congregation . . .

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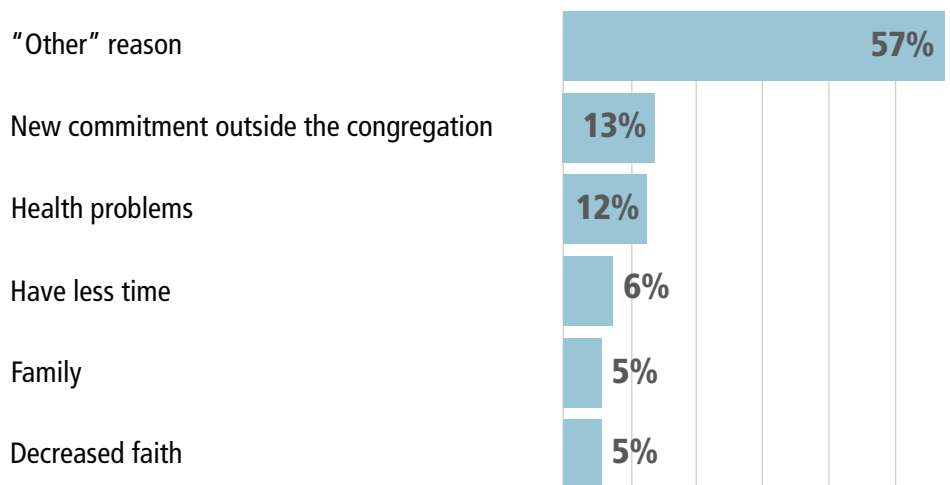
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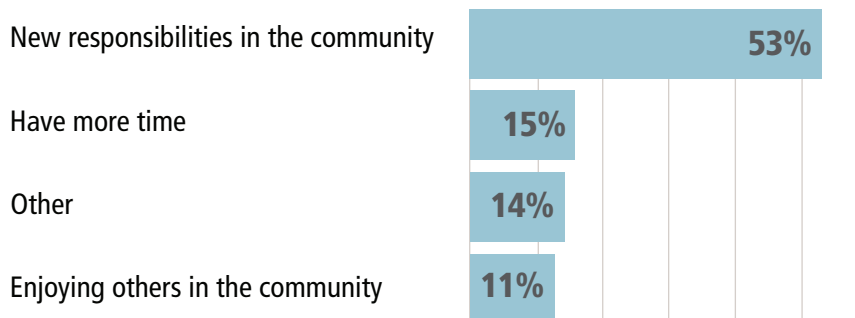
## COVID-19

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

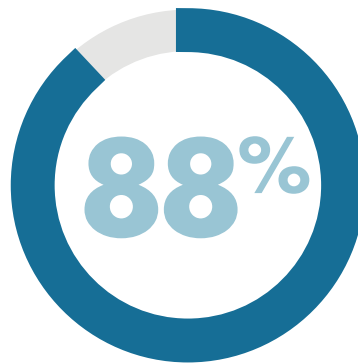


### Reasons for Increased Congregational Involvement



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.

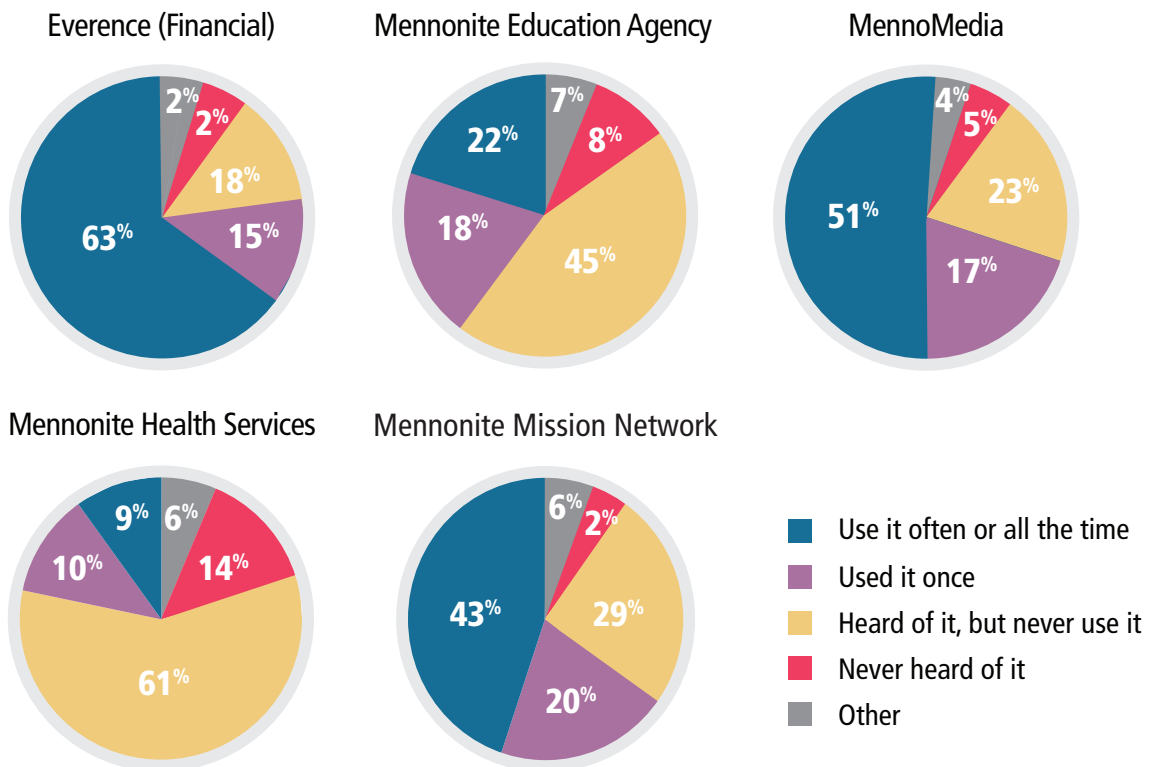
Largely, people are committed to the mission of the denomination. When asked about understanding the mission of MC USA, the majority of members (52%) indicate they relate to it well enough, with 63% agreeing that MC USA consistently promotes the missions of the denomination, and 74% indicating that it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



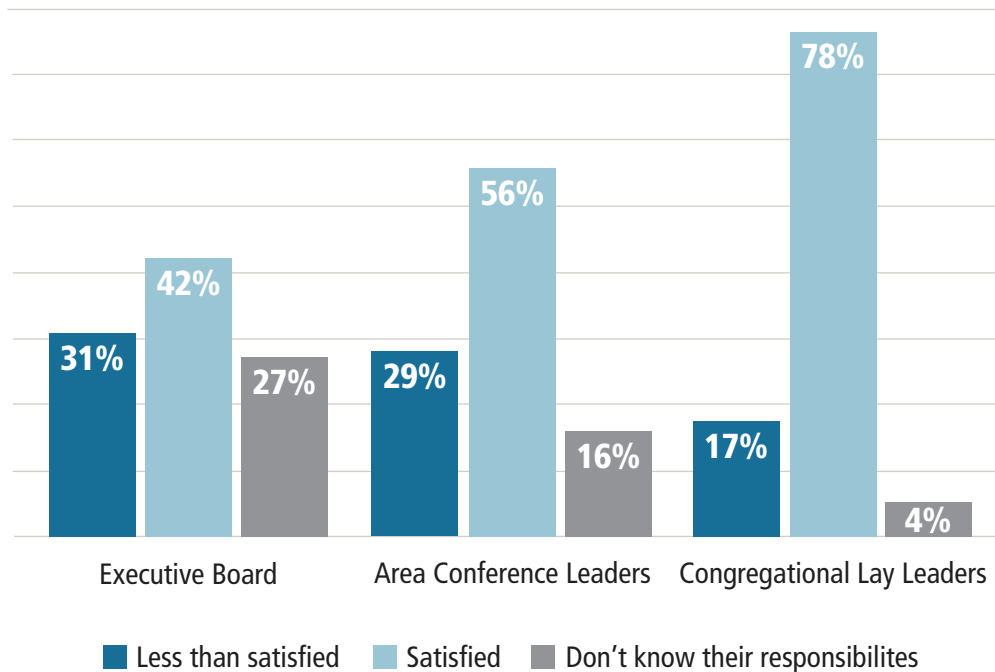


## Leadership

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

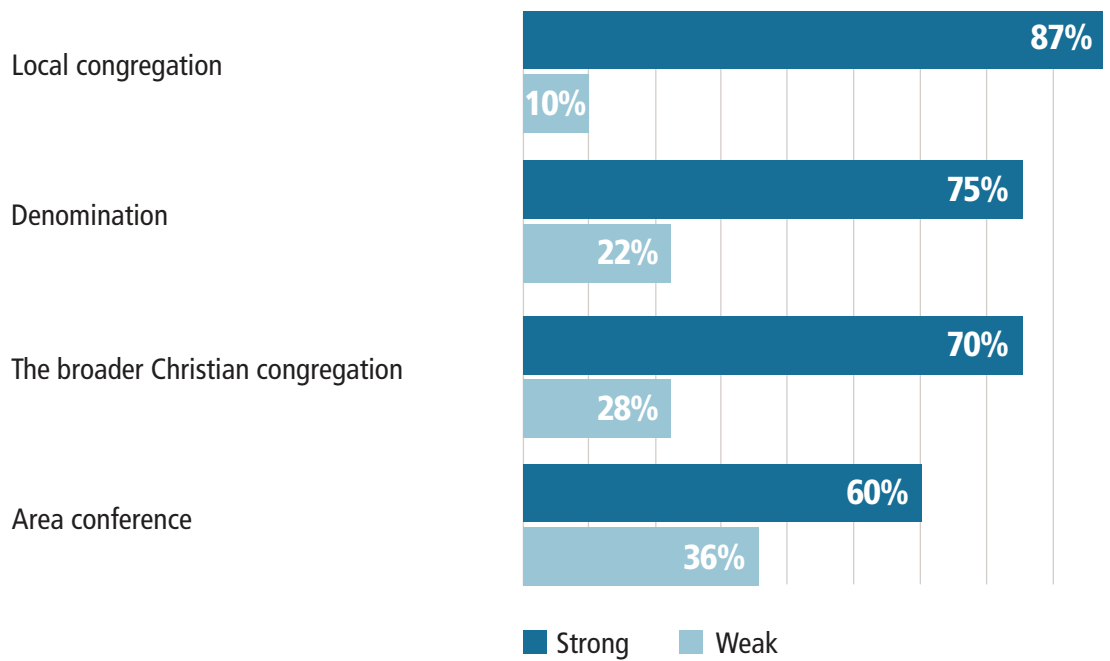
**“I think leadership is doing a tremendous job, given the political climate of this country right now, given what is happening within the church itself, I’ve been very impressed and happy with where things are.** And, at least speaking for myself, there’s nothing that springs to mind immediately in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



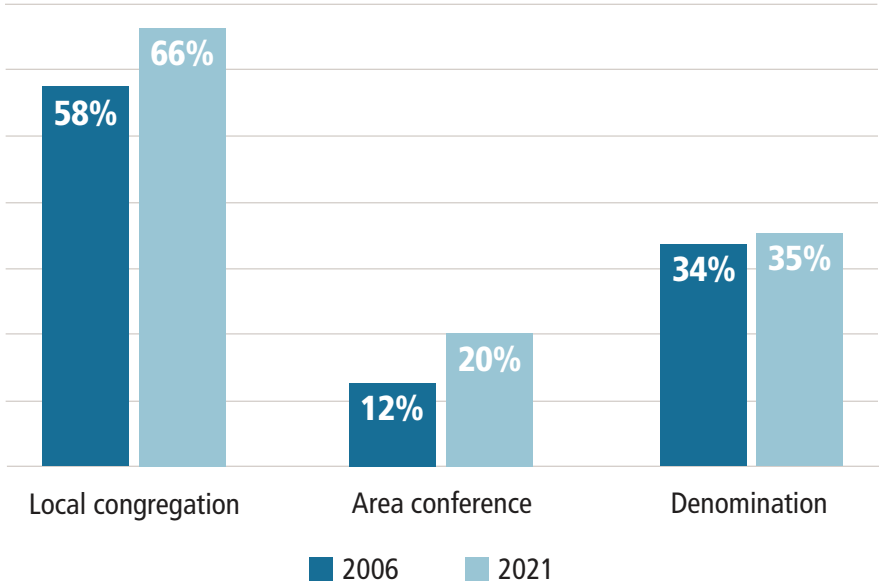
Unsurprisingly, current MC USA members also have mixed levels of personal commitment to different organizational bodies within the faith. Most participants indicate a strong tie with the local congregation (87%), followed by the denomination (75%), the broader Christian congregation (70%), and then the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

