

Chapter 4:

Examine Tenets and Philosophies That Drive Membership

Comprehending more deeply how members perceive and connect with the values and mission of the denomination and with MC USA specifically helps develop an understanding of what drives the engagement and commitment to the denomination and, ultimately, with MC USA. As noted in previous chapters, participants engage with congregations and the Mennonite faith because of how they embody the life of Jesus. While participants in the study indicate that there are divisions in the denomination, they are hopeful and believe that unity is possible if MC USA helps them return to a focus on their core values and mission.

This chapter captures how survey participants regard the denomination and MC USA as an organization, generally. It also explores how participants think the denomination and MC USA should move into the future.

Values and Mission

Current MC USA members indicate a desire for the denomination to be forward-thinking and forward-looking. Yet, around one-quarter of members have a neutral stance on structural aspects of the denomination: 36% of members agree that MC USA has consistency and uniformity in their values. Two-thirds (63%) of current members indicate that MC USA consistently promotes the mission, and about one-half (52%) see MC USA as being open to changes in values and mission.

When asked about approaches to church, the majority of members (53%) indicate that they do not want MC USA to return to or focus on its traditional or historical approach to church, and they believe the denomination should move toward or focus on developing a more progressive or innovative approach to church (58%).

MC USA Values and Mission

The denomination should move toward or focus on developing a more progressive or innovative approach to church.

58%

MC USA should not return to or focus on a more traditional or historical approach.

53%

MC USA is open to changes in values and mission.

52%

During interviews, participants gave examples of why they believe the denomination should be forward-thinking and forward-looking. Many shared that they would like to see the denomination be willing to grow and change, and they acknowledge that this is not an easy undertaking.

“We’re not going to go back to the good old days because they weren’t good old days for everybody, for one thing. **Take the bold stances as our religious foremothers and forefathers did with abolition or civil rights or things where the church was courageous to stand up and make having a faith mean something.** So, be forward-looking.” — Melanie

“I want my cake and to be able to eat it too. I want the denomination to set a tone, and I think that for the future that tone will need to be more progressive in nature, and, at the same time, try to maintain connection. **In other words, recognize there are more traditional expressions in the church, and allow those more traditional congregations to make decisions about whether they want to go on the journey with the denomination or not.**” — Ken

“We’re trying to please everyone, and no one’s happy. **We either need to stop trying to please folks, or we need to choose a side and just decide who we’re going to appease, and that takes a lot more wisdom than what I have.** All I can say is that right now, it seems like it’s not working, and I’m not smart enough to say how to make it work.” — Declan



“I guess I don’t know how to put it in concrete steps per se, but I think the issue for me is that there should be a little bit more grace extended to individuals who are at different places on the theological spectrum. Acceptance of the other is not communicated clearly enough. Our positionality just went from one extreme to the other, but the mentality stayed the same. So that’s what I think was unfortunate. **It should have been . . . a time for growth and stretching, and instead, we just went from one extreme to the other. So, I don’t see that as progress.**” —Dean

“We’re not growing rapidly. It’s a denomination that’s shrinking rapidly. I think, as evidence, the ethnic component of the faith has been emphasized, and it has stemmed the tide of shrinking rapidly. **The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Maybe, perhaps, it’s time to try something new.**” —Marcus

Members have mixed opinions on denominational unity and the ability of MC USA to move forward. Fully 41% of current members do *not* agree that the denomination is too divided to come together, and about one-third (32%) of current members agree that MC USA has lost the core purpose to be individual followers of Jesus Christ because of all the division. On a more positive note, 51% of participants believe that MC USA can come together if it returns to a focus on Jesus.



Follow-up interviews emphasize the importance of having a denomination that focuses on finding unity through shared faith.

“I have an affinity with MC USA in spite of all the tensions. I think we need to maintain our inclusiveness. And that’s what keeps me involved in the church. I see a lot of tensions trying to pull us into a small community, with a tightly defined understanding of God and . . . spirituality. And that needs to be included, but it cannot be the dominant thought. **My connection is with the church as long as it’s open and the denomination is willing to broadly accept people. That’s where I’m at.**” — Bill

“The crux of the message is that we need to stay Bible focused. We need to stay focused on the Great Commission, and we need to stay focused on living out our Christian life with the Anabaptist perspective. . . . We need to keep that the main thing and forget about all the other stuff. **Because I think if we keep that the main thing, everything else will fall in line, and we will be able to maintain unity as a church.**” — Jolene

“I think that the denomination is going to have to learn how to talk about their faith distinctives more clearly than they do now because it’s really easy to talk about external cultural things and to be like ‘We’re Mennonites, so we have potlucks,’ which is stupid because a lot of people have potlucks. **But it’s easier to talk about that than to talk about your theology, which is like, what is sanctification or what is discipleship? It’s way hairier [to talk about politics], but it’s possibly more unifying than cultural practices. I think that’s going to be really important: to refocus on theology.**” — Morgan

“There’s so much division and so much othering that’s going on, on a macro scale, that it’s almost as if we haven’t learned from our history, we haven’t learned truly within our own conference what reconciliation means, what it means to join in unity, amidst differences. And that’s really sad for me, if I’m honest, that’s really sad because—especially for someone like me who didn’t grow up within this very specific culture and identity—the social action, and the joining in God’s mission of reconciliation was what drew me to say, ‘Yes, I’m a part of this.’” — Toni



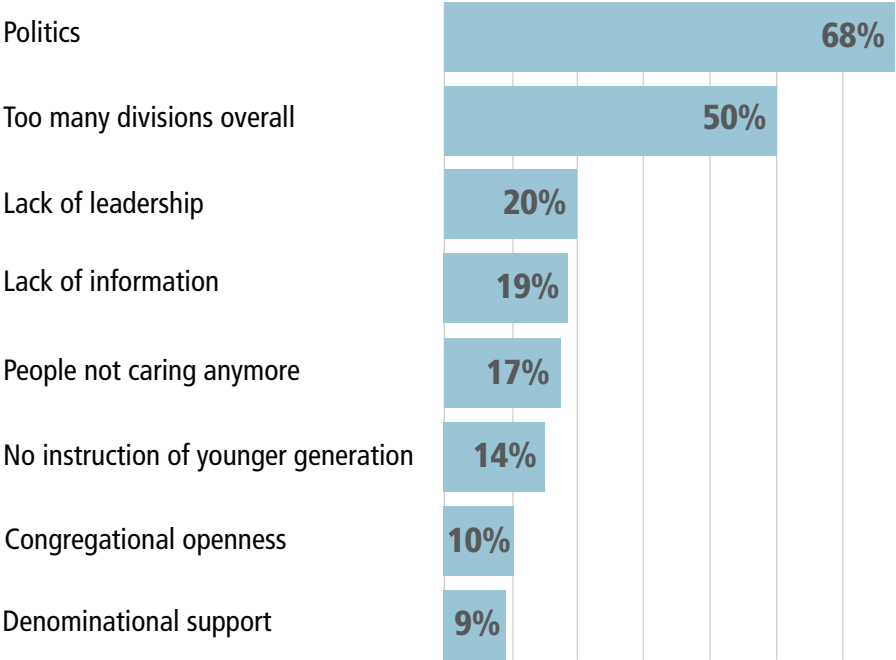


Mennonites do not exist in a vacuum. Societal issues influence philosophical divisions among members and, ultimately, within the denomination. The majority of MC USA members select politics (68%) and too many divisions overall (50%) as the issues affecting congregations' ability to live out the core mission of following Jesus Christ.

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Other factors that impact mission fulfillment include lack of leadership (20%), lack of information (19%), and people just not caring about mission anymore (17%). What doesn't seem to impact congregations' ability to live like Jesus is a lack of support from MC USA or congregations' unwillingness to talk about it. Only one-tenth of current members indicate mission fulfillment is related to either denominational support (9%) or congregational openness (10%).

What Impacts MC USA's Ability to Live Out Core Mission?



Politics and overall divisions are continually mentioned in follow-up interviews when members discuss the current state of the denomination. At the same time, current members regularly cite support from the denomination as a method of overcoming the current rift.



“[I would suggest] the Mennonite Church do the outward work of making opportunities and paying attention to power dynamics. But at the same time, doing the real reflective work, internal work of ‘Why do I think this way?’ Really try to get at why systems run the way they do. And to be open to new ways of thinking and doing based on new ideas that hopefully would be allowed to be shared through new people in leadership positions.” — Jeanie

“MC USA trying to keep everybody at the table, it just didn’t work. Almost everybody I knew who was working with Pink Menno in 2013 is no longer Mennonite-affiliated. They got tired of saying, ‘Accept me as a human being’ and just said, ‘Fine, I’ll take my skills elsewhere.’ And for a lot of those people, they were people who viewed Anabaptism in the church the same way I did. They were willing to stay, but the Church couldn’t change fast enough.” — Nicholas

“I appreciate the seminars and conferences; they’re pertinent to me. Glen Guyton, the Executive Director, he’s doing a really good job of embracing the people who remain part of MC USA and celebrating that rather than lamenting the congregations and the people who are leaving. I think we just have to embrace who we are and go with it rather than being sad about all the people who are leaving.” — Daniel

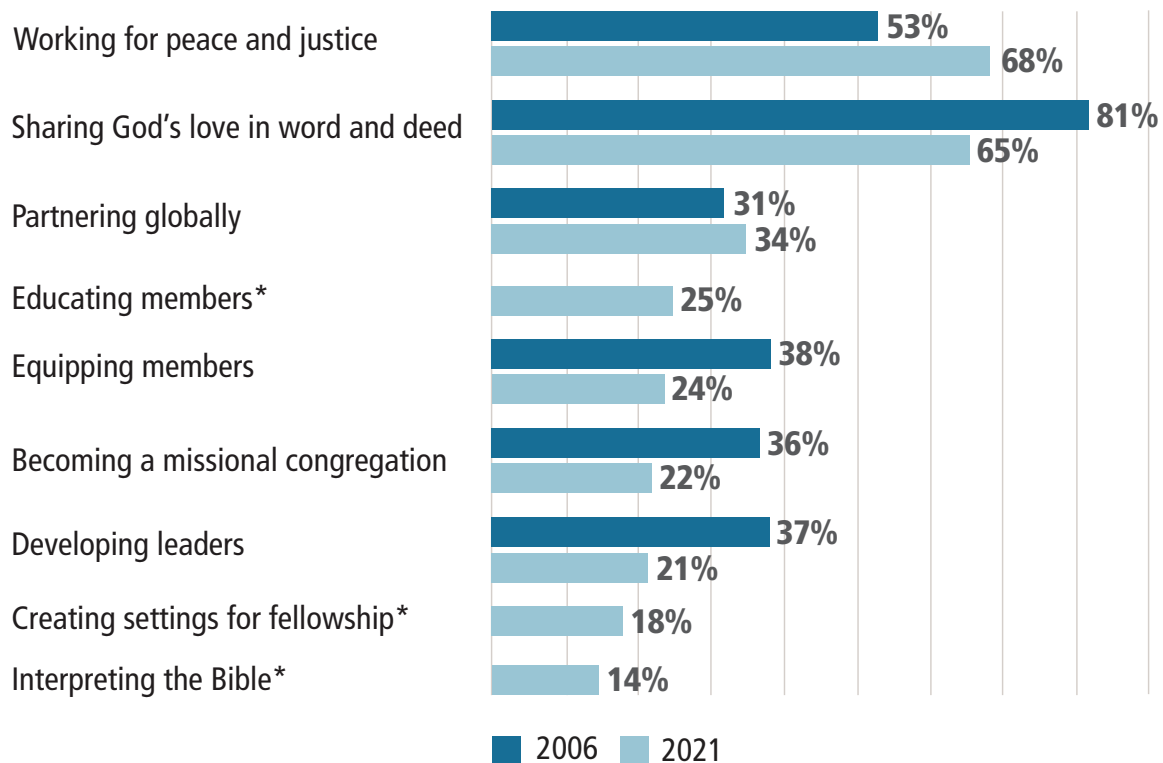
“I’m 23 years old and so many of my peers that I grew up with or . . . met in college, who also grew up in Mennonite churches, are not interested in being part of MC USA. And I feel like there’s so many reasons for that, but I do feel like the lack of . . . political stances the church has taken are a reason for that. I guess that’s part of why I say that I think the church needs to openly say, ‘Gay pastors are okay’ and, ‘Women in leadership are okay.’ All of those things, and I feel like that would entice more of my peers to be involved in the church again.” — Penny



The essential activities that MC USA provides to its members continue to be working for peace and justice (68%) and sharing God’s love in word and deed (65%). However, since 2006, working for peace and justice has become the most important activity, with sharing God’s love coming in a close second (Kanagy, 2007).

Other important activities include partnering with Mennonites around the world (34%), educating members for discipleship (25%), and equipping members for ministry (24%). Additional mentions include becoming a missional congregation (22%), developing leaders for the congregation (21%), creating settings for fellowship (18%), and interpreting the Bible (14%).

Essential Activities of MC USA



*Question added in 2021 study.

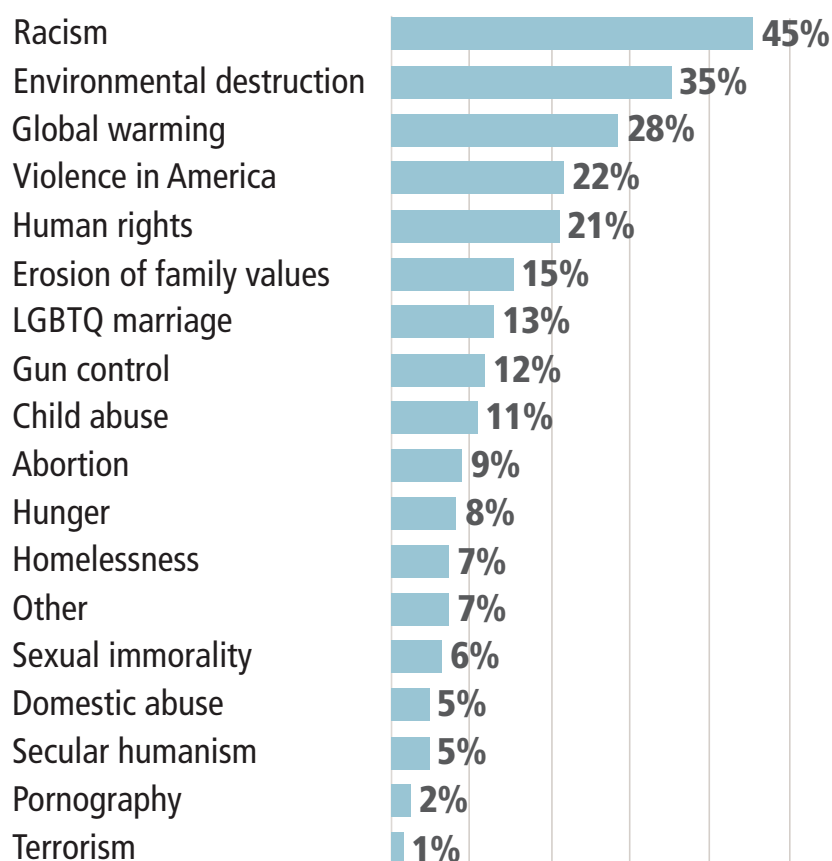
Across the board, participants agree that outreach is important (88%). More specifically, 53% indicate that outreach is important and worth doing, and 24% suggest that it is very important and that more efforts should be made to increase outreach, and 11% say outreach is essential. The preferred mode of outreach among current members is service (70%), although 16% prefer missional work, and 14% prefer an “other” form of outreach.



Cultural Issues

Members were asked to select their top three areas of concern from a list of essential issues in the USA and worldwide. The significant problems that concern MC USA members are racism (45%), environmental destruction (35%), global warming (28%), violence in America (22%), and human rights (21%).

Social Issues of Concern for MC USA Members



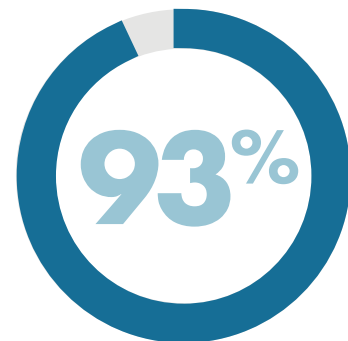
Major cultural issues continue to cause division within the denomination despite current members indicating that exclusion is at odds with being Mennonite. Fully 70% of participants say that excluding people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or any other identity is inherently at odds with what it means to be Mennonite. Likewise, 42% of participants say they would leave the denomination if it did not align with their values.



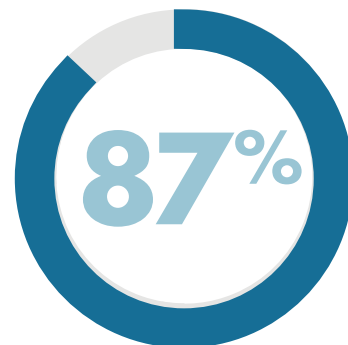
MC USA members identify inclusivity and representation as key in the Mennonite faith. Most members (83%) agree that part of peacemaking is being inclusive of *all* people. Most members (86%) also indicate that it is essential for MC USA leadership to represent the denominational body. Only 6% of participants agree that MC USA should *not* get involved with social justice efforts. However, the varying levels of support for social justice aimed at specific groups indicate that some issues are better received than others among the denominational body.

Almost all participants (93%) agree that MC USA ought to be committed to anti-racist efforts. Likewise, 87% of members indicate that MC USA should advocate for migrants and refugees, regardless of documentation status.

Over one-half (57%) of members feel that MC USA ought to officiate weddings between LGBTQ individuals in the congregation.



agree that MC USA ought to be committed to anti-racist efforts.



say MC USA should advocate for migrants and refugees, regardless of documentation status.

Follow-up interviews emphasize the importance of MC USA's movement toward an inclusive, diverse denomination. Participants suggest diversifying and listening to the voices included in the conversations about the future of the denomination.

“A lot of people who are leaders in congregations, I know for a fact, have very little clue of what it means to be a person of color or to be a queer person or to be a minority in a cultural or religious sphere. That’s not inherently a bad thing, but a lot of those leaders, because of that lack of experience, don’t know how to have those conversations in a way that invites people in and makes everyone feel heard. **I think it’s really, really important that the denomination provides congregations the information and the tools and the history they need to facilitate conversations around difficult issues.**” — Benjamin

“There was a committee that MC USA formed of queer people and people of color, and the committee made this recommendation, and then MC USA didn’t follow it. My hope moving forward is that MC USA be serious about these changes, fully following through on the recommendations of people of color. They’re like, ‘I asked for your advice, and then I’m not going to consider it.’ Putting those practices kind of aside and breaking those habits. **It’s not just including historically marginalized folks in leadership positions. It’s the follow-up and the support of them in those positions and saying, ‘Yes, you recommended this decision. We’re going to trust you and do it.’** I think that is sort of my hope for MC USA going forward.” — Edie



“I think that [MC USA] should keep going in the direction that they’re going in because I think it’s right. They also could do more to specifically attract oppressed peoples. The more that MC USA does to not only talk about people who are oppressed and what our stance is but . . . really does things to serve and work with those communities, they’re going to find new members in that way. **I think that there is a great spiritual need among people who feel disaffected and rejected by the church. I think that MC USA could be one of those denominations that is going out and looking for the lost sheep.**” — Abbie

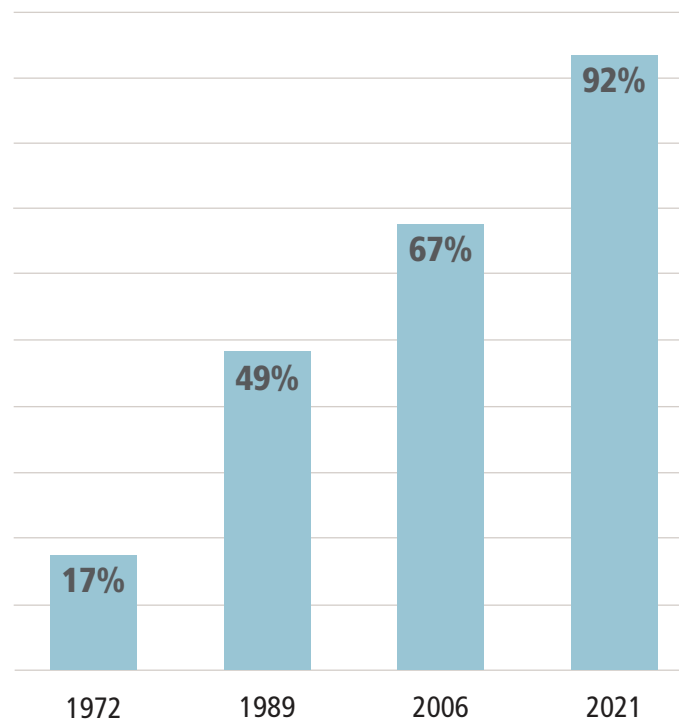
“I think there probably needs to be a tremendous amount of house cleaning done and intentionality about Black people, in particular, serving on the board, about members of the LGBTQ community on the board. **What I’ve noticed is they often have Black people . . . or members of the LGBTQ community as a token to parade around their work—their diversity, equity, and inclusion work—but not in a space where those people can implement any type of change.** So, I would argue that at least half of the board should look like me, right? At least half of the board should look like my pastor, who is a member of the Inclusive Mennonite Pastors. Those folks who people have not listened to for so long, but who the church consistently parades around [to show that the church is] progressive when in fact [it isn’t]. Those are the people who need to hold positions of power. Those are the people who need to be the decision-makers.” — Isabella



Gender is also part of the conversations about change in the denomination. While 55% of respondents are part of congregations with an accessible, public policy to address sexual misconduct, almost one-third do not know if their congregation has a policy (32%), and 7% indicate that their congregation does not have a policy around sexual misconduct. Likewise, almost one-half of participants (48%) are part of a congregation that has a helpful system in place in the congregation and area conference to address the potential experience of the misuse of power by a ministry colleague or congregation member. Yet, 40% do not know if said safeguard is in place, and 7% say that such a thing does not exist in their congregation. People may not be aware of a sexual misconduct policy because most members have not experienced members of their congregation violating their physical or social boundaries (89%).

On a positive note, there is almost unanimous acceptance of women in pastoral roles, as 92% say that women may fill any pastoral roles, including the lead pastor. The Mennonite Church has continually increased its support for the ordination of women since 1972 (Kanagy, 2007).

**Changes in the Percentage of MC USA Members
Who Support the Ordination of Women**

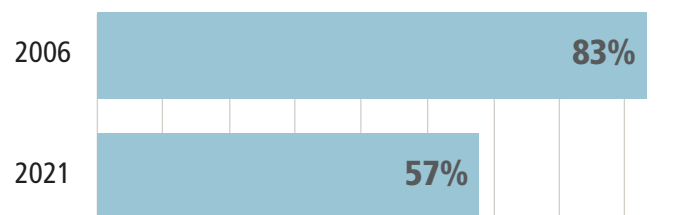




Guidelines and Polity

Membership guidelines are a divisive topic among participants, but the percentage of members who want clear membership guidelines has decreased about 25% since 2006—from 83% (Kanagy, 2007) to 57%.

**Changes in the Percentage of MC USA Members
Who Want Clear Membership Guidelines**



Follow-up interviews indicate that members see the current guidelines as hurtful to the denomination's growth.

“People continue to leave. Within our own congregation, people have left, assuming MC USA is going to adopt membership guidelines that include LGBTQ persons as members and as clergy. They leave, and it hasn't even been decided yet. It feels frustrating in a leadership sense because we get sort of, I mean, for lack of a better way to say it, punished for participating in an organization that seems to be leaning that way without having the fruit of it. So, for me personally, I would appreciate the inclusion of LGBTQ persons, both as members and as leaders, but the reality is that's not the case. We're not getting that from the conference or the denomination, and yet I'm losing members because they think that's where we're going. **It feels like, well, why don't we just decide to do that or decide not to do that. And then, people can make their decision [to leave or to stay].**” — Jeffery

“I think it's disingenuous to say that MC USA should just stay out of politics and that's not what we're doing. I think it is a question of justice when the denomination has for so long held exclusionary and discriminatory stances toward LGBTQ people to just ignore that. **I think it would be ideal if, in addition to getting rid of the membership guidelines, the church also passed a statement of repentance and reconciliation, and so forth, for its treatment of LGBTQ people.**” — Alex

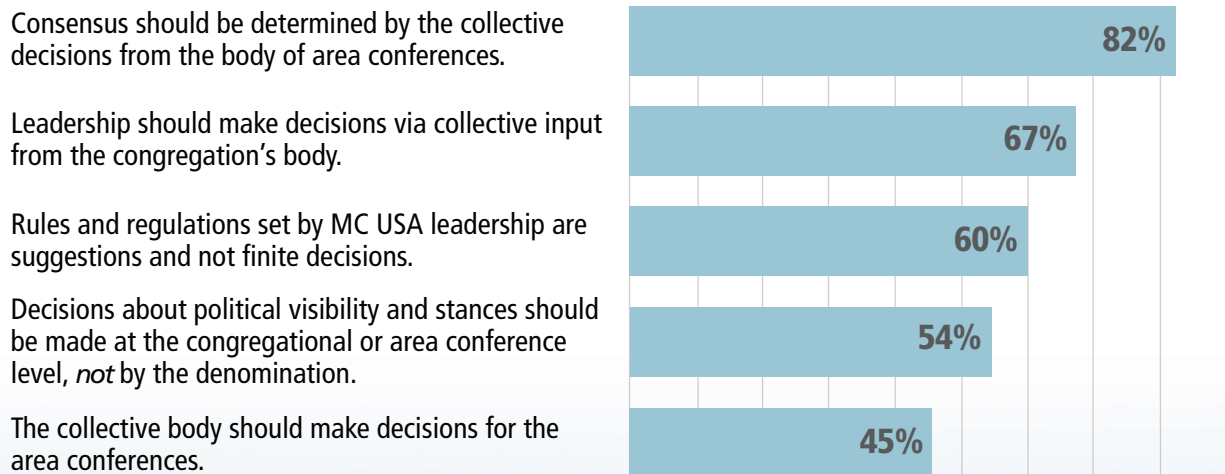
“I say this recognizing it's out of a sense of void within our own conference leadership, and that is that MC USA [should] give some resources for conferences, for congregations, for their structures to process the upcoming resolution of retirement for the membership guidelines. **How can we come together and have a conversation about this without getting so intertwined with our emotions and knee-jerk reactions?**” — Patrice



Members more consistently agree on supporting congregational autonomy and community decision-making. Over one-half of members (54%) agree that decisions about political visibility and stances should be made at the congregational or area conference level, *not* by the denomination. Regarding polity, only 18% agree that congregations should be required to follow the rules and regulations set by MC USA leadership. Most members (82%) agree that consensus should be determined by the collective decisions from the body of the area conferences. Only 8% of current members indicate that leadership should make decisions, not laypersons.

Likewise, almost two-thirds (60%) of members agree that rules and regulations set by MC USA leadership are suggestions and not finite decisions. Around two-thirds (67%) suggest that leadership should make decisions via collective input from the congregation's body. And less than one-half of participants (45%) indicate that the collective body should make decisions for the area conferences.

Decision-Making



Follow-up interviews offer a deeper look into members' understanding of the type of polity that may be best for MC USA.

“We felt the pain of feeling like we’ve been policed for wanting to be inclusive, for example. As a leader, I see other denominations have a much more congregational-based polity, and I find that really attractive.

That means we can be free to follow Jesus in the way that we feel is faithful and still be in community with other congregations within our conference and within our denomination. It’s not all thinking exactly the same way as we do, but we should still be in community with each other. I mean, that’s truly my hope. . . . I wouldn’t want to lose congregations in our conference who aren’t at the same place as I am on LGBTQ support. I still value them as colleagues in ministry and in faith. I think that would definitely feel like a loss to me. So I hope that the denomination is more toward a congregational-based polity with the conferences and denomination providing sort of structure for that and resourcing and a way for us to gather through conferences and assemblies.” — Aimee



“I have to tell you that before having experiences with MC USA, I did not like the idea of a national denomination. **I really thought that each church should be locally defined. And I still kind of think that, but MC USA makes my heart sing, which is a totally new experience for me.** What I really love about it is that it both offers guidance to the local churches and acts as the public face of all the churches together.” — Abbie

“I think that there needs to be a 300,000-foot view where [the denomination is] outside of that political fray and encourages congregations to have a bigger view **but also recognizes that congregations are in a unique political situation and . . . to have grace with one another.** You know, a rural congregation in Southern Alabama is going to look at things a little differently than a congregation in San Francisco.” — Declan



“I do think we are reaching the limits of congregational autonomy because, at some point, any group does have to define itself. And I think MC USA has lost all definition of itself or is at least very much in danger of that. I don’t ever think it was as heavy handed as some people want to make it out to be. That’s not been my experience.” — Jake

“I think there is perhaps a healthier way of thinking about MC USA. So it’s kind of like a centered set grouping. For congregations that want to say, ‘Hey, we might be further or closer to the center, but this is sort of the center that we are all moving toward and can all kind of agree on.’ **I think there is still a way of creating very meaningful groupings and very meaningful unity and coherence with a centered set model, perhaps even more so than with a bounded set model.**” — Tiffany

“I think something that really appeals to me and the church that I’m a part of is that we have a part-time pastor, and we are layperson led. **Everyone takes turns leading worship; everyone is at some point on the leadership committee, and we decide things by consensus.** Sometimes that feels tedious, but it definitely feels a lot better than a committee deciding something and telling the church that a decision’s been made. Because you are the congregation, you are a part of congregational life, and that is not just showing up on Sundays, that also is planning the budget and all that other [stuff].” — Edie

