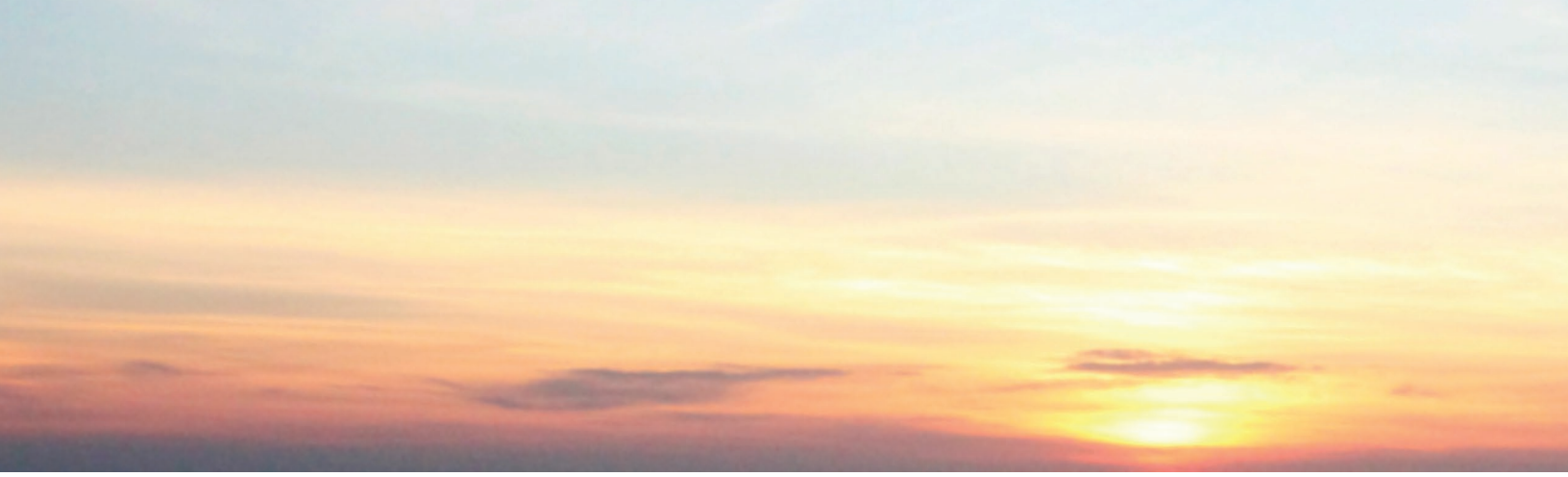


Conclusion



This study captures a point in time for the members of MC USA and the Mennonite faith but also reflects the coming trends and changes that have occurred over time. The landscape of MC USA's membership is changing but remains deeply rooted in history, tradition, and a belief that Mennonites should remain true to their origins and core tenets.


Beliefs and relationships are the main connecting points between MC USA members and the Anabaptist/Mennonite faith. Participants find themselves connecting to God most often when at church and in nature. Steady, lifelong ties to the Mennonite Church have remained relatively constant since 1989. Current MC USA members have grown up with multiple connections to the Mennonite Church, and often these connections are started in childhood and remain into adulthood. MC USA members have a solid commitment to the Mennonite Church, but this does not stop them from trying out other denominations. The number of MC USA members that have been part of a non-Mennonite denomination has risen steadily over the years. Often, exploration with other communities reifies “cradle” Mennonite members’ commitment to the church.



The role of most members within the denomination is individual follower of Jesus Christ. Most members do not occupy a leadership position within the denomination, although folks who do have a leadership position typically do so as a volunteer. Most MC USA members have participated in various organizational activities, including attending a Mennonite Relief Sale and a national Mennonite adult assembly. Despite the low percentage of new members (about 10% in 10 years), those affiliated with MC USA are typically active churchgoers. Most members have also held at least one position within a Mennonite congregation, usually as a Sunday school teacher, worship/music leader, and/or board member. Religious activities that current MC USA members regularly participate in include attending services, praying, and singing.

Members emphasize that ethnic ties may be a piece of what it means to be Mennonite, but it is not the defining feature of Mennonites today. Being Mennonite comes from faith, especially commitment to religious beliefs (particularly peace and community) and living like Jesus, which continue to be important for MC USA members. Members are often willing to give up or refine certain aspects of the Mennonite Church to promote and support inclusive practices. Since 2006, MC USA members appear to be using more designations to describe their religious beliefs, although Anabaptist and Mennonite remain those used most often. Labeling religious beliefs under smaller designations can be difficult, and often multiple classifications are used (and sometimes interchangeably) because specific labels signal particular ideas and expectations.

Members want the Mennonite Church to show up in the world through faith connections, but without getting caught up in secular distractions. What standing apart from popular culture looks like can vary, but at the center is living out one's faith. A key aspect of Mennonites' ability to faithfully show up in the world is through interdenominational connections. Denominations and interdenominational relationships help create unity and community. However, MC USA members indicate that not all denominations meet their faith needs. For many, a Mennonite church is the place they have felt the presence of a higher power.



MC USA congregations provide ample support to members and the surrounding community. Continued resourcing (i.e., financial support, training, and educational materials) from the denomination provides valuable support for local internal and external initiatives. Although participants are generally content with what they receive from their local congregations, since 2006 (Kanagy, 2007) there has been a recognizable drop in MC USA members who strongly agree with any given statement on missional engagement. A key factor in this decline may be related to a perceived lack of support and guidance coming from within the denomination.

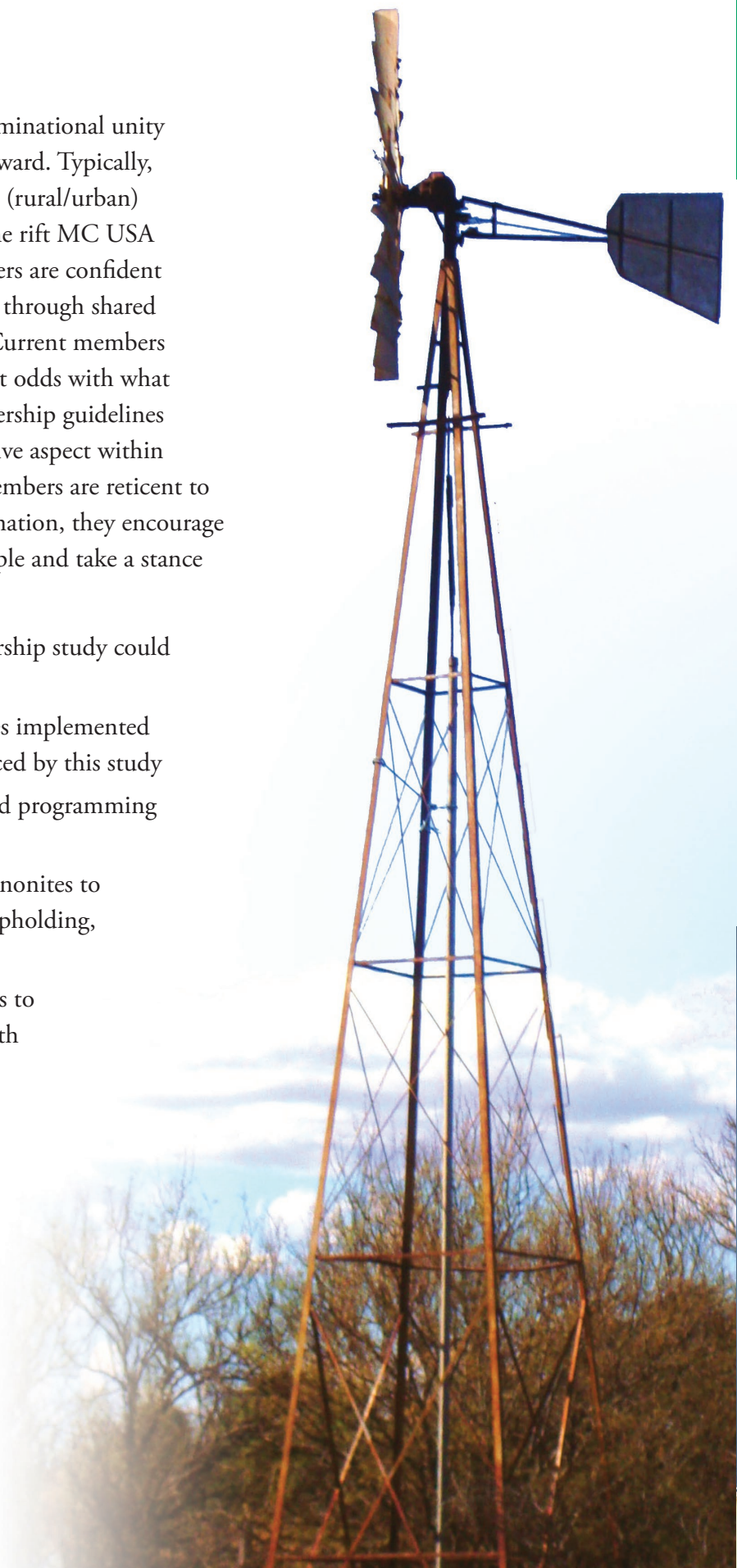
MC USA members are generally aware of various services offered by the denomination, and those who use services typically find them advantageous. Agencies and organizations that MC USA is affiliated with are an important feature of the denomination through which members find connection. However, respondents do not indicate that they would leave the denomination if a specific resource were not available. Members have mixed satisfaction rates with different levels of leadership. The executive board has the lowest rate of satisfaction and awareness of responsibilities, and lay congregational leaders have the highest rate of satisfaction and awareness of responsibilities. Current MC USA members also have mixed levels of personal commitment to different organizational bodies within their faith, with the strongest connection being to the local congregation and the lowest to the area conference.

The majority of current MC USA members indicate a desire for the denomination to be forward-thinking and forward-looking. Yet, a moderate number of members have a neutral stance on structural aspects of MC USA, especially the consistency and openness in values and mission. This neutrality may be related, in part, to members' experiences that only some kinds of voices matter, which members emphasize needs to change. Current members consistently support congregational autonomy and community decision-making, stressing that the denomination should set the tone and provide guidelines. Still, final decisions must be made at the congregational/conference level.

Members have mixed opinions on denominational unity and the ability of MC USA to move forward. Typically, political (liberal/conservative) and social (rural/urban) divisions are the main contributors to the rift MC USA has been experiencing. However, members are confident that the way forward is by finding unity through shared faith, primarily a Jesus-centered focus. Current members indicate that exclusionary practices are at odds with what it means to be a Mennonite. Yet, membership guidelines and other LGBTQ issues remain a divisive aspect within the denomination. Although current members are reticent to cause further bifurcation to the denomination, they encourage denominational leaders to lead by example and take a stance on contemporary social issues.

Additional research for the next membership study could include the following:

- An impact study of the major changes implemented in the strategic plan that was influenced by this study
- Deeper exploration of the services and programming offered by MC USA to its members
- A more targeted study of young Mennonites to determine how they are impacting, upholding, and rejecting aspects of the faith
- More interviews within congregations to hear stories of how those involved with the Mennonite faith are making an impact in their communities



Thank You

Springtide Research Institute and MC USA would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the members and stakeholders who completed the survey and shared their stories and experiences with us in interviews. Your participation will inform strategic directions for years to come and lead to a stronger denomination for everyone.

When citing this work:

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By having the courage to listen to their members, Mennonite Church USA deeply embodies the Data with Heart belief of Springtide. We are grateful for the opportunity to be part of their data-informed strategic planning.

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Springtide helps you go from just ideas that you have in your brain to things you can actually do for the community you're trying to serve.

—Rev. Abigail Visco Rusert

Director of the Institute for Youth Ministry
at Princeton Theological Seminary

