



# The Mennonite Experience:

MC USA Membership  
Study 2021–2022



Study conducted by Springtide Research Institute®



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# Introduction

## Intention of the Study

Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) leadership is driven by a deep need to know the social context and life experiences of members in order to serve them appropriately and with care. The last membership study was conducted in 2006 and published in 2007 by Conrad Kanagy, a sociologist and Mennonite. For this current study, MC USA asked Springtide Research Institute®, a sociological research organization, to help them create an updated picture of membership to drive strategic planning through data-driven, actionable insights. MC USA benefits from knowing the demographics of members but, more important, from knowing what keeps members engaging with, belonging to, and thriving in their congregations, the denomination, and the faith.

Springtide's mission revolves around understanding those very phenomena: engaging, belonging, and thriving. Through 63 interviews and 2,276 survey responses, this study dives into members' stories and experiences, providing MC USA with both narratives of members' experiences and statistics about dimensions, including demographics, behaviors, and values. Numbers do tell a story and are valuable to making strategic decisions, but because MC USA is committed to listening in a more robust and intimate manner, this collected combination of statistics and stories can help drive the organization's decisions that will aid how members engage, belong, and thrive as Mennonites.

This study reveals engaged members who want MC USA to be inclusive and open, demonstrating their commitment to following Jesus in their daily life. Members choose practices that embody the foundational element of being Mennonite: peacemaking and nonviolence. This report shows that modern Mennonites are engaging within their congregations, outside their congregations, and with their faith generally as they live out their beliefs. The study highlights ways that members are thriving because of their connection to their faith and how they want others to do the same. Members also share reasons they belong to their congregations, to their denomination, and to their faith.

Overall, MC USA's intention is to use these findings to develop strategic planning and respond to the identified needs of members. This comprehensive report highlights ways to do that by showcasing the people they serve. Although the data in this report may not be entirely representative of all the lived experiences of MC USA's members, it does capture the voices of those who are most engaged. This study will not specifically solve the problem of serving those who are not engaged, but it can help MC USA identify what is working and who is showing up to talk about it.





The following chapters highlight the MC USA Mennonite experience by capturing the findings from the key objectives for this study. Chapter 1 is a developed membership snapshot of MC USA's current constituents. Chapter 2 explores what being Mennonite means to

members, both culturally and spiritually. Chapter 3 uncovers members' experiences with, and understanding of, MC USA. Chapter 4 explores the tenets and philosophies that drive membership. The following section is a high-level summary of the contents of this report.

“My dream for MC USA is that our best theological and polity discernment energy will be spent on nurturing new communities of faith and equipping new leaders that are Anabaptist, welcoming and actively following Jesus into the beloved community. I hope that we will grow in our welcome of nonethnic Mennonites, and that this welcome will include not only individuals but congregations and other faith communities who have come to embrace Anabaptist convictions. I pray that we will not be driven by fear but guided by love.” —A.J.

# Methodology

## What Story Does This Data Tell?

Springtide Research Institute designed and conducted a custom study for MC USA, including a survey of members to establish basic demographics, interviews with volunteer survey respondents to better understand their experiences as Mennonites, and a tailored comparison to secondary data sources to examine changes happening over time in the Mennonite Church.

To design the research project, Springtide conducted “discovery” calls with MC USA stakeholders to identify the set of clarified objectives noted below. Springtide then used those objectives to build the research tools, examine secondary data sources, conduct the fully synthesized analysis, and develop the findings in this report. These objectives are also the titles of the chapters in this report.

## Objectives

**Objective 1:** Develop a membership snapshot of MC USA constituents.

**Objective 2:** Determine what being Mennonite means, both culturally and spiritually.

**Objective 3:** Discover current members’ experiences and understanding of MC USA.

**Objective 4:** Examine tenets and philosophies that drive membership.

## Survey

We used a combination of existing measures and original, customized questions to develop a comprehensive survey about who MC USA members are and what their experiences and expectations of the denomination are. The survey was designed to provide a general view of MC USA but was limited primarily to respondents who are part of MC USA’s mailing list. The survey was launched in July 2021, with 2,276 members completing it.

## Interviews

We interviewed 63 members who opted in during the survey for a follow-up interview to better understand their experiences as Mennonites by listening to their beliefs about what it means to be Mennonite today, experiences with MC USA generally, and where they would like to see the denomination moving forward. Springtide coded these interviews and identified emergent themes that we then used to make recommendations toward the relevant objectives. Quotes from the interviews support the analysis in the subsequent sections.

## Secondary Data Analysis

We compared statistical data presented in Conrad Kanagy’s *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (2007) to our data set to identify the major changes, or lack thereof, in the demographics, beliefs, and behaviors of MC USA members. The data for Kanagy’s study was collected in 2006.

# Key Findings and Recommendations

**Participants acknowledge the historical significance of cultural traditions but also emphasize that this limits growth and diversity by alienating chosen/non-cradle Mennonites.**

- Moving forward, leadership needs to work with delegates and representatives from different Mennonite groups to understand what aspects of MC USA have been isolating, and then plan actionable steps to reconcile past hurts and prevent exclusionary practices moving forward.

**MC USA members emphasize the importance of living out their faith, which happens through denominational and interdenominational connections.** MC USA participants are deeply committed to their faith and peacemaking. They believe that being Mennonite means interpreting Scripture and behaving in the world as peacemakers who live out the word of Jesus.

- MC USA should offer clear opportunities to serve those outside the church and to express Christian love. This will make people feel more connected to and engaged with MC USA and the denomination overall.
- MC USA should work to balance tradition and reinforce the teachings and beliefs of the Mennonite denomination while focusing on being more open and inclusive of those who want to be part of it.
- MC USA should continue to provide resources and networks to further develop intradenominational and interdenominational connections.

**Members are drawn to the denomination because of the values and support they receive as they develop and live out their faith.**

- MC USA should discern ways to model the embodiment of the Mennonite faith while guiding congregations toward MC USA's understanding of Anabaptism.
- To further model the mission and values of the faith, MC USA should consider developing additional training for congregational leaders centered around diversity, equity, inclusion, and conflict management within a church setting.
- MC USA should celebrate the support provided to members at the congregational level. At the denominational level, MC USA should provide more transparency regarding the mission and responsibilities of the executive board and develop ways to improve effectiveness in their communications.
- The denomination should continue its support of the agencies and organizations that MC USA is fostering and affiliated with.





**Current MC USA members indicate a desire for MC USA to be forward-thinking and forward-looking.**

While 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. MC USA leadership deserves praise for their steps thus far in moving the denomination toward a more inclusive and diverse denomination.

- MC USA should work with committees of historically underrepresented identities to continue to identify their needs and create a plan to put their suggestions into action.
- MC USA governance should emphasize movement toward being a forward-thinking denomination that is actively working toward inclusive practices, as members view this as an embodiment of the core premise of the Mennonite faith.
- MC USA also needs to continue diversifying those in leadership (i.e., people who head denominational committees and boards) and giving voice to those who feel marginalized, including but not limited to members that are women, part of the LGBTQ community, people of color, young adults, and nonethnic/non-cradle Mennonites.
- Leadership needs to continue walking alongside conferences and congregations, providing resources and guidance as each community discovers how to live out the Mennonite faith.



# Chapter 1:

## Develop a Membership Snapshot of MC USA Constituents

This chapter captures the demographics of the MC USA membership who participated in the 2021 survey conducted by Springtide Research Institute. Exploring two main categories of demographics to build a full picture of the landscape of MC USA members, this chapter first examines basic demographics and then moves into demographic information unique to the Mennonite nature of MC USA. The first section covers everything from individual identity to geographic context. The second covers participants' origin stories with the Mennonite Church and how they remain engaged (or don't) in the present day. Note that throughout this chapter the same dimensions that Conrad Kanagy looked at in 2006 are mirrored to provide opportunities for meaningful comparisons of change over time.

### Basic Demographics

#### General

Demographics are not enough to truly understand the experience of the MC USA member, but it is important to capture the picture of those who engaged in the research,

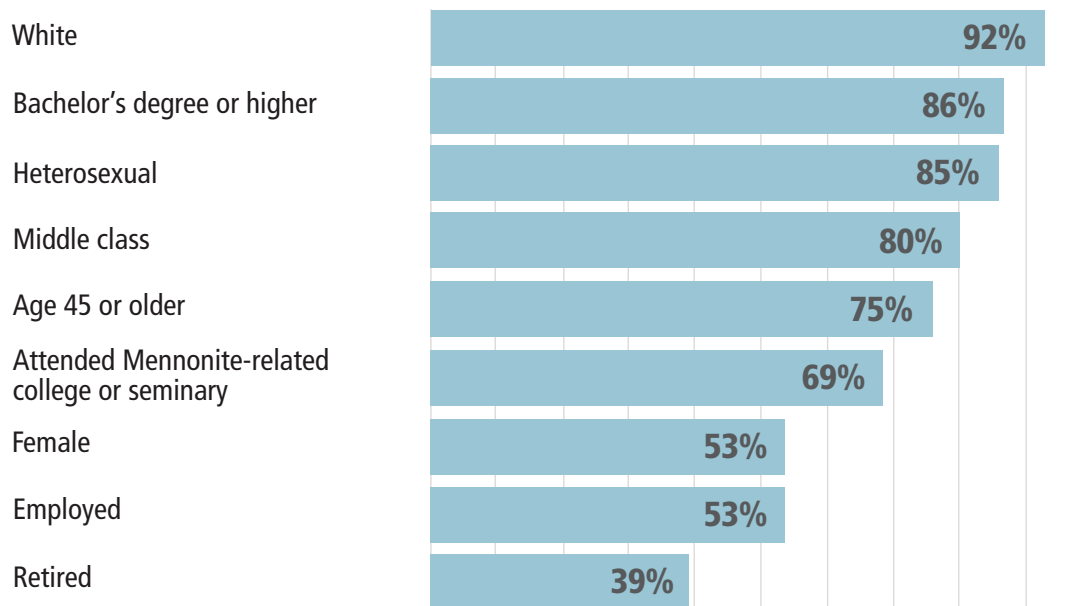
as it likely reflects those who are engaged in other aspects of “being Mennonite.”

The majority of members have children who are of adult age (64%), followed by elementary age (13%), adolescent age (9%), and preschool age (8%). While this may not be entirely representative of the MC USA population, it is likely a snapshot of those who are engaged, given they opted into the study.

MC USA members in this sample self-identify as white (92%), heterosexual (85%), 45 years of age and older (75%), and female (53%). In 2006, Kanagy indicated that 30% of MC USA members were under age 45. Today, one-quarter (25%) of members are under age 45. Participants typically have a bachelor's degree or higher (86%) and have attended a Mennonite-related college or seminary (69%). Most consider themselves middle class (80%) and have an annual income of at least \$50,000 (77%). Many MC USA members are either employed (53%) or retired (39%). The top occupational fields for MC USA members include retired (24%), other (21%), education (14%), and health care (8%).

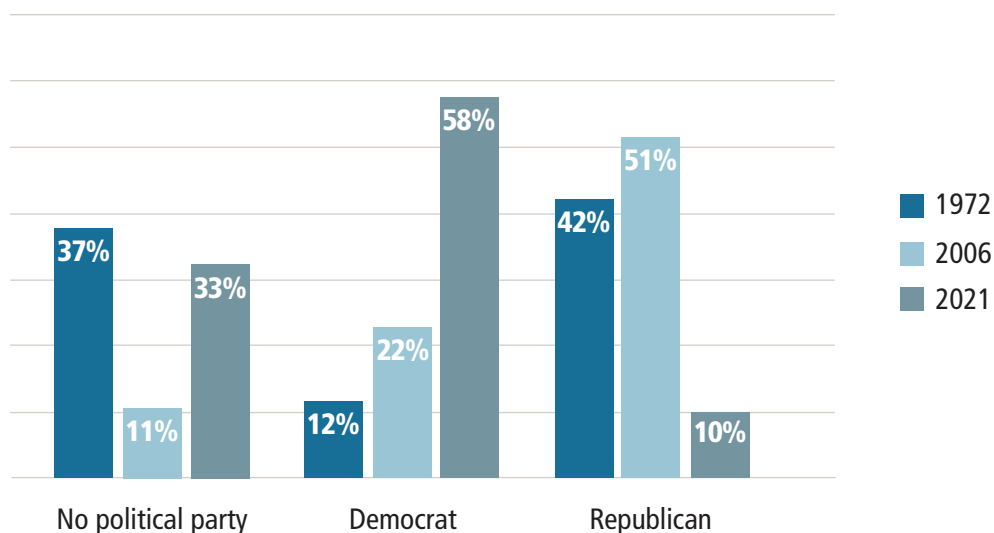


### Snapshot of Survey Participants (Majority)



Members who participated in this study indicate they are happy and healthy. About 10% of MC USA members are currently living with a disability, and the majority of participants (88%) consider themselves to be in good or very good health. And, despite most members having a little bit (54%) or a fair amount (33%) of stress, almost all participants consider themselves moderately (55%) or very (42%) happy.

### Political Party Affiliation of MC USA Members

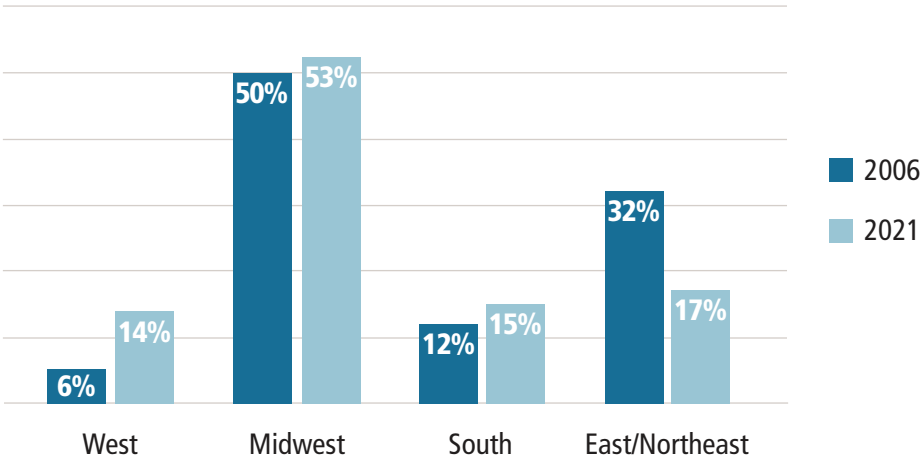


The percentage of MC USA members who identify as Democrat or no political party (including independent, other, none) has doubled since 2006. The percentage of members who identify as Republican has dropped significantly. Given that 79% of participants agree that contemporary issues and politics are important to discuss in congregations, understanding the directional trend of members’ political leaning is essential. However, despite their desire to be able to address issues and politics, 68% believe that politics detract from the core mission of following Jesus Christ. Most MC USA congregations (49%) have a theologically/socially diverse and/or liberal/progressive (49%) frame. However, about one-fifth (21%) of members indicate that their congregation still uses a conservative or traditional structure.

**Location**

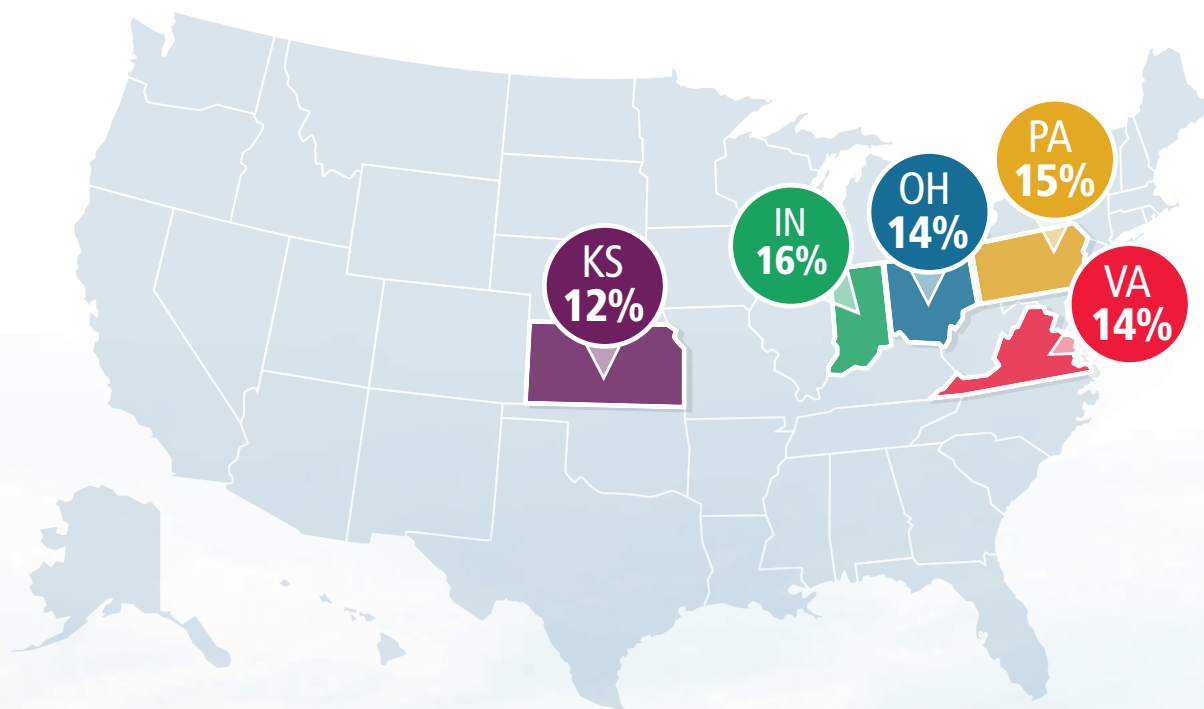
In the past 15 years, MC USA members have migrated westward. In 2006, only 6% of MC USA members resided in the West, while 32% resided in the East/Northeast. Today, 14% of members live in the West, while 17% live in the East/Northeast.

**Regional Distribution of MC USA Members**



A closer look suggests that two-thirds of Mennonites in the US reside in 5 states, including Indiana (16%), Pennsylvania (15%), Ohio (14%), Kansas (12%), and Virginia (14%). Members, although concentrated in specific geographic locations, are somewhat evenly spread across dwelling types, with many members settling in small cities (25%), open country/farmland (24%), small towns (20%), large cities (18%), and medium cities (14%). Additionally, through a series of “check all that apply” questions, MC USA members describe the community surrounding their congregation as rural (38%), suburban (38%), and urban (35%). Most MC USA members attend a church that is within 5 miles (53%) or 6 to 10 miles (23%) of their home.

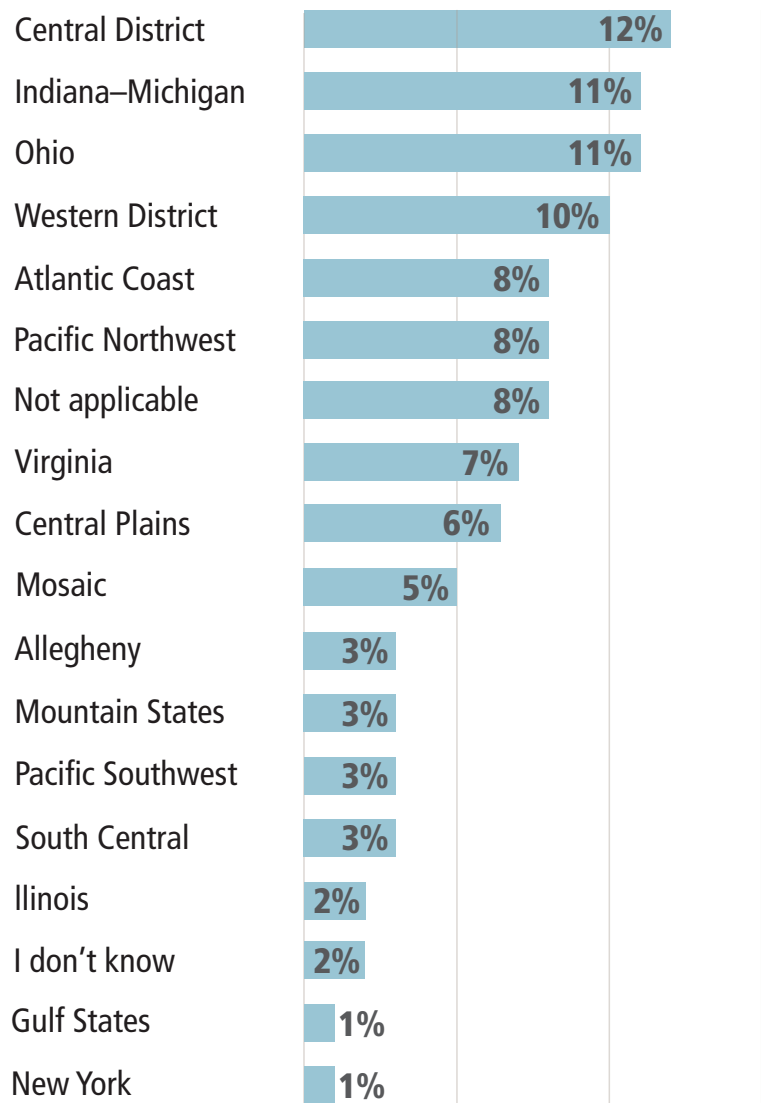
## Top 5 States of MC USA Survey Participants





The area conferences that members' local congregations are a part of are as follows: Central District (12%), Indiana-Michigan (11%), Ohio (11%), Western District (10%), Atlantic Coast (8%), Pacific Northwest (8%), Virginia (7%), Central Plains (6%), Mosaic (5%), Allegheny (3%), Mountain States (3%), Pacific Southwest (3%), South Central (3%), Illinois (2%), New York (1%), and Gulf States (1%). It is important to note that 10% of participants could not answer this question either because it was not applicable (8%) or they did not know (2%).

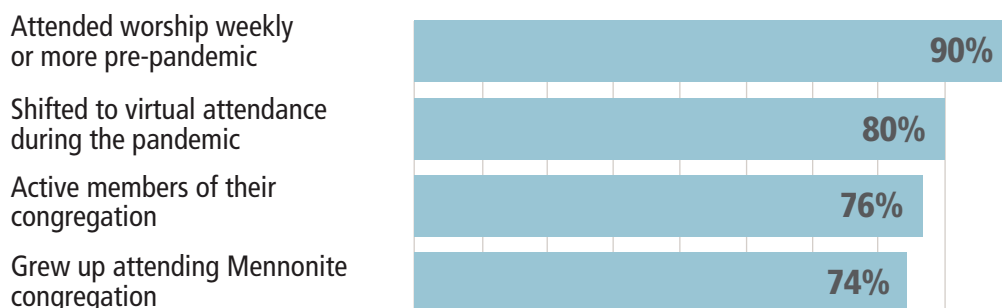
**Percentage of MC USA Survey  
Participants by Local Congregation**



## Mennonite-Specific Demographics

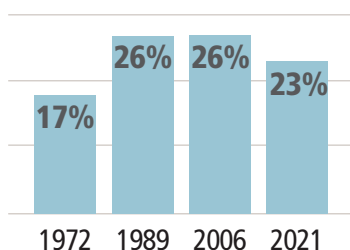
To foster a deeper understanding about how people came to engage with the Mennonite Church and how they continue to practice, participants in the interview portion of the Springtide study were invited to share their journey. These stories, alongside the survey data collected, formed a general picture of how MC USA members come to the church and how they engage.

### Members' Attendance



The percentage of members who identify steady, lifelong ties to the Mennonite Church has remained relatively constant since 1989, but that percentage is currently under 25% of all members.

### Percentage of Non-cradle Mennonites

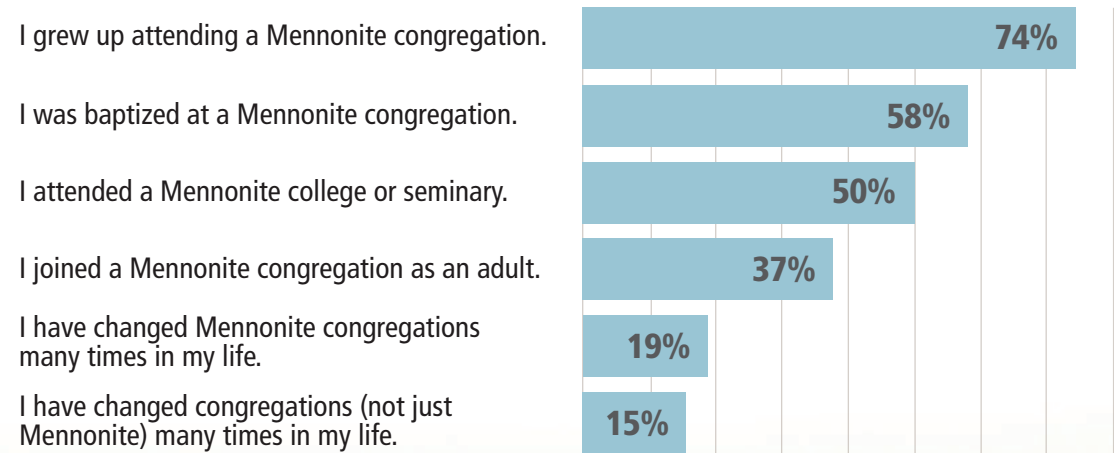


Current MC USA members have grown up with multiple connections to the Mennonite Church, and often these connections started in childhood and remain into adulthood. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of current members indicate that both parents were members of a Mennonite congregation, and 23% grew up with neither parent attending a Mennonite congregation.

### Engagement: Commitment

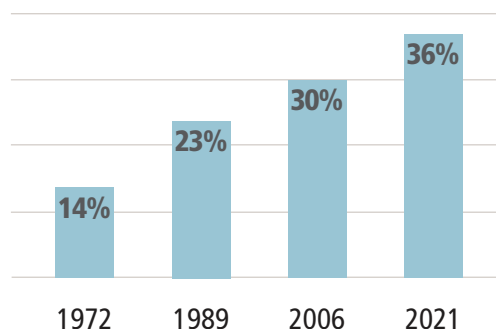
Of current members, 58% were baptized at a Mennonite congregation, and 50% have attended a Mennonite college or seminary. Most members have been following a Mennonite church for at least two decades—50% attending for over 40 years, and 27% attending for 21–40 years.

#### Connections to the Mennonite Church



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. In 1972, 14% of Mennonites had come from “other than Mennonite” denominations (Kanagy, 2006). Today, just over one-third (36%) of survey participants have been a member of a non-Mennonite congregation, and 15% have been a member of a non-Mennonite congregation many times.

**Members from  
“other than Mennonite”**



Despite, or perhaps because of, their exploration of other communities and denominations, “cradle” Mennonites feel a deeper connection to the church after their experiences elsewhere. Several interview participants shared this phenomenon when asked about the nuance and dimensions of “being Mennonite.” The stories on the next three pages highlight the journey that many who were born into the faith share, in which their experience of being Mennonite moved from being unconscious to chosen. They embraced the faith as part of their identity after recognizing for themselves what being Mennonite means.





George shares that he left the insulated world he grew up in and interacted with a wide range of people. In doing so, he realized the value of what it meant to him to “be Mennonite”—not just in name alone.

“I think it took me going out of that bubble to develop a better sense of what it means to me to be a Mennonite. For me, that was going to college and seeing how other people live and how people do life, whether that was other Mennonites or other people in general. And so, just interacting with a broader group of people other than the bubble that I had grown up in. And I think through that, realizing that it wasn’t enough for me to just have a personal faith, a personal view on, you know, what God is to me, but I had to . . . say, what is our communal face? What does God look like for the people around me, for my community? I think it was very much this idea of shifting the focus from being inward-looking [to looking] outward at things. I think that really changed how I view my faith.” — George

Tiffany was not experiencing “being Mennonite” in the way she believed she should, so she explored other Mennonite organizations that were living out their commitments to peacekeeping in a more active and obvious way.

“I was raised in the ‘Brethren in Christ’ denomination, but I think I became kind of disaffected by that because what I understood of the denomination’s commitments to peacemaking, I was not seeing lived out or preached in my local congregation. And the more that I studied Jesus, his words and teachings, the more that it seemed like that was a central aspect of his message. So, I did some volunteer work with a Mennonite Central Committee, and I hung out with Mennonites there. I was like, ‘Hey, these are pretty cool people. And they’re putting into practice the things that they say they believe.’ I found that the underlying Anabaptist theology was what made me say, ‘Okay, this is really where I fit in terms of my theological inclinations.’ It seemed like a pretty natural move then to become part of MC USA.” — Tiffany

Ken speaks about how easy it is to take his knowledge about his faith for granted after being immersed in it for so long. He was encouraged by someone outside the faith to explore it in a deeper and different way. In doing so, he began to define it for himself and reconnect with what it means to “be Mennonite.”

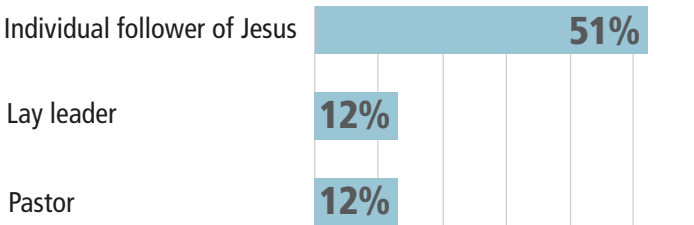
“I was born into it. I grew up in a Southeast Iowa, rural Mennonite, Amish community, and my parents took me to a Mennonite church from the day I was born. This is an important part of my story. When I graduated from high school, I ended up attending college at Drake University. . . . [A professor] said, ‘What do you know about your tradition?’ And I said, ‘Not a whole lot.’ I mean, it had been very experiential to this point. He said, ‘You’re not going to write about Roman Catholics. You’re going to write about Mennonites and go to the library and read this book on Anabaptism.’ And that began a journey for me, in which I truly, as a young adult, claimed the Mennonite faith or expression of Christianity as my own. So even though I was born into it, there was a point at which it became a conscious decision on my part to continue in it.” — Ken



## Engagement: Participation

Participants predominantly identify as an individual follower of Jesus Christ (51%), without holding any additional main roles with the Mennonite Church. The other main roles include lay leader (12%), pastor (12%), and none (10%).

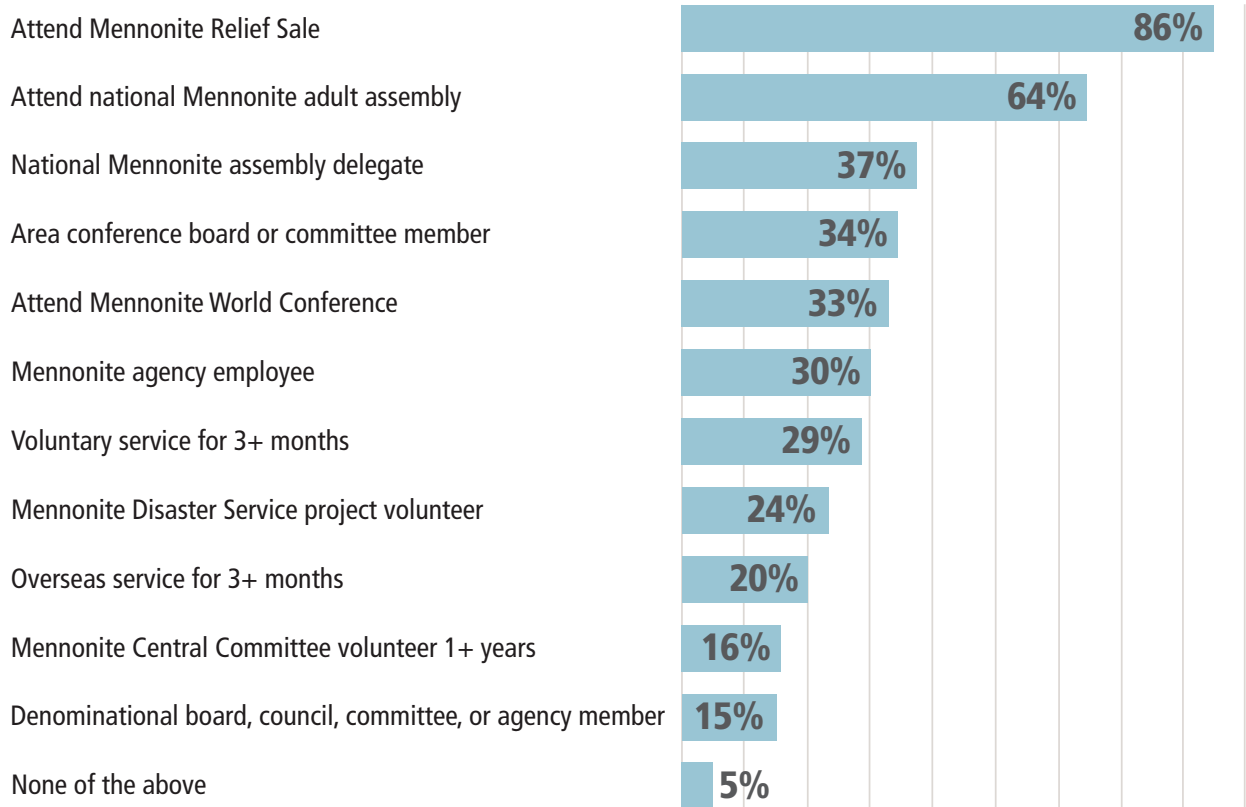
### Roles within MC USA



The most common leadership role of members is volunteer (41%). This is followed by “other” leadership capacities (12%), full/part-time lead or solo pastor (8%), paid employee (7%), area-specific pastor (3%), bi-vocational pastor (3%), co-pastor (2%), and full/part-time associate pastor (2%).

Most MC USA members participate in various organizational activities. Only 5% of members indicate they have not participated in any of the following denomination-associated activities. Most members (86%) have attended a Mennonite Relief Sale and a national Mennonite adult assembly (64%). Around one-third (37%) of participants have served as a delegate to a national Mennonite assembly, served on an area conference board or committee (34%), and attended Mennonite World Conference (33%). Over one-quarter (30%) of members have worked as an employee of a Mennonite agency, participated in voluntary service for three months or more (29%), and helped the Mennonite Disaster Service project for a week or more (24%).

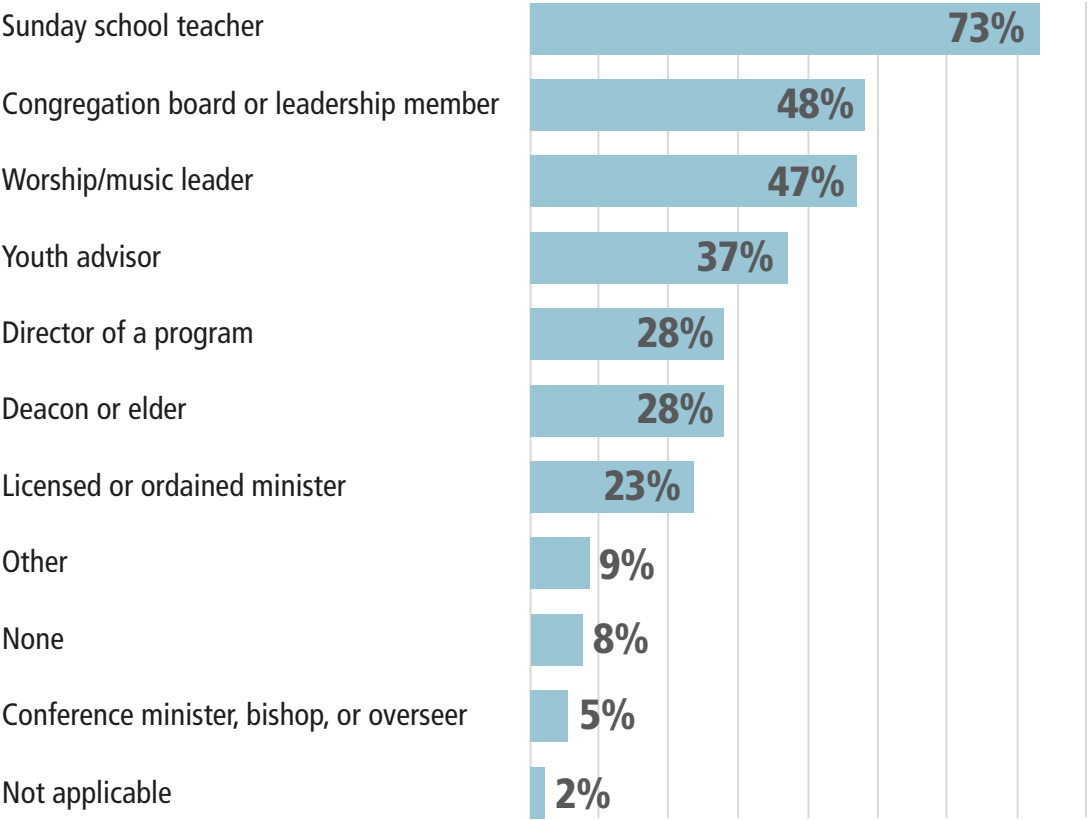
Participation in MC USA Activities





Most members have held at least one position within a Mennonite congregation. The most common positions held by participants include Sunday school teacher (73%), congregation board or leadership member (48%), worship/music leader (47%), followed by youth advisor (37%), director of a program (28%), deacon or elder (28%), and licensed or ordained minister (23%). Less than one-tenth (8%) of survey participants indicate they have not held any position within a Mennonite congregation.

### Positions MC USA Members Have Held within a Congregation



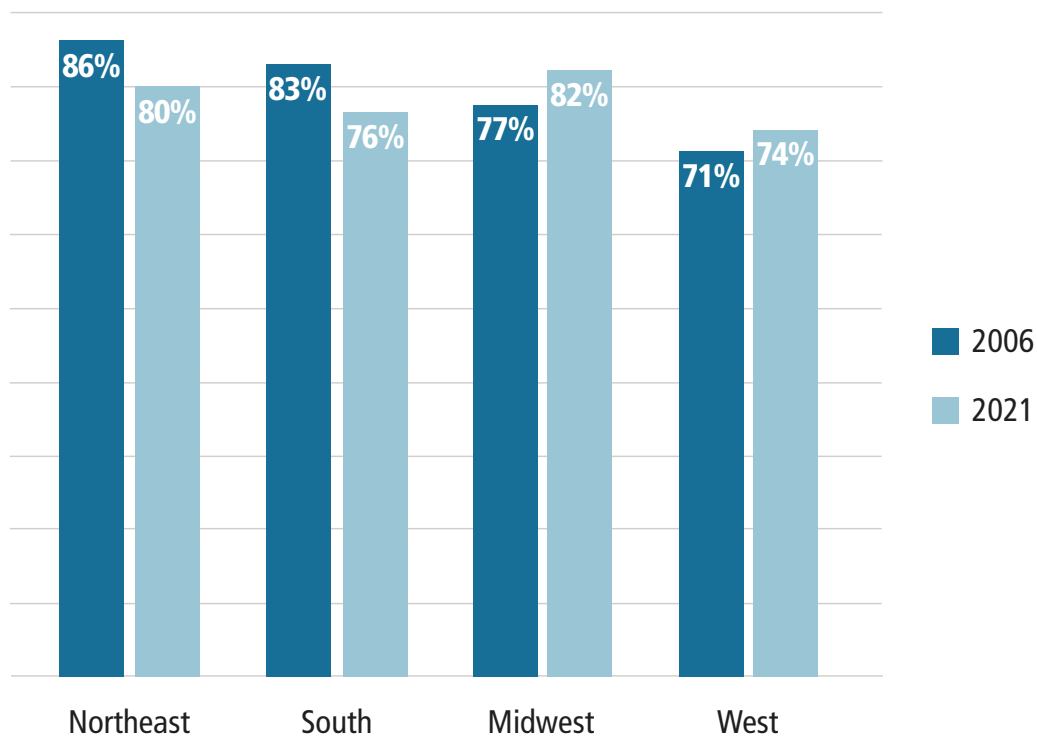
Despite the low percentage of new members (about 10% increase in 10 years), those affiliated with MC USA are typically active churchgoers. Just over three-quarters (76%) of current members are active in their congregation, with 5% attending but not members of a congregation. Only a small percentage (6%) of participants are inactive members or not affiliated with a Mennonite congregation (5%).



Kanagy (2006) found that church attendance of “more than once a week” was about 8% in 2006. Current members indicate that pre-pandemic almost all MC USA’s members attended worship weekly (80%) or more (10%). Most of these folks shifted to virtual attendance weekly (73%) or more (7%) during the pandemic.

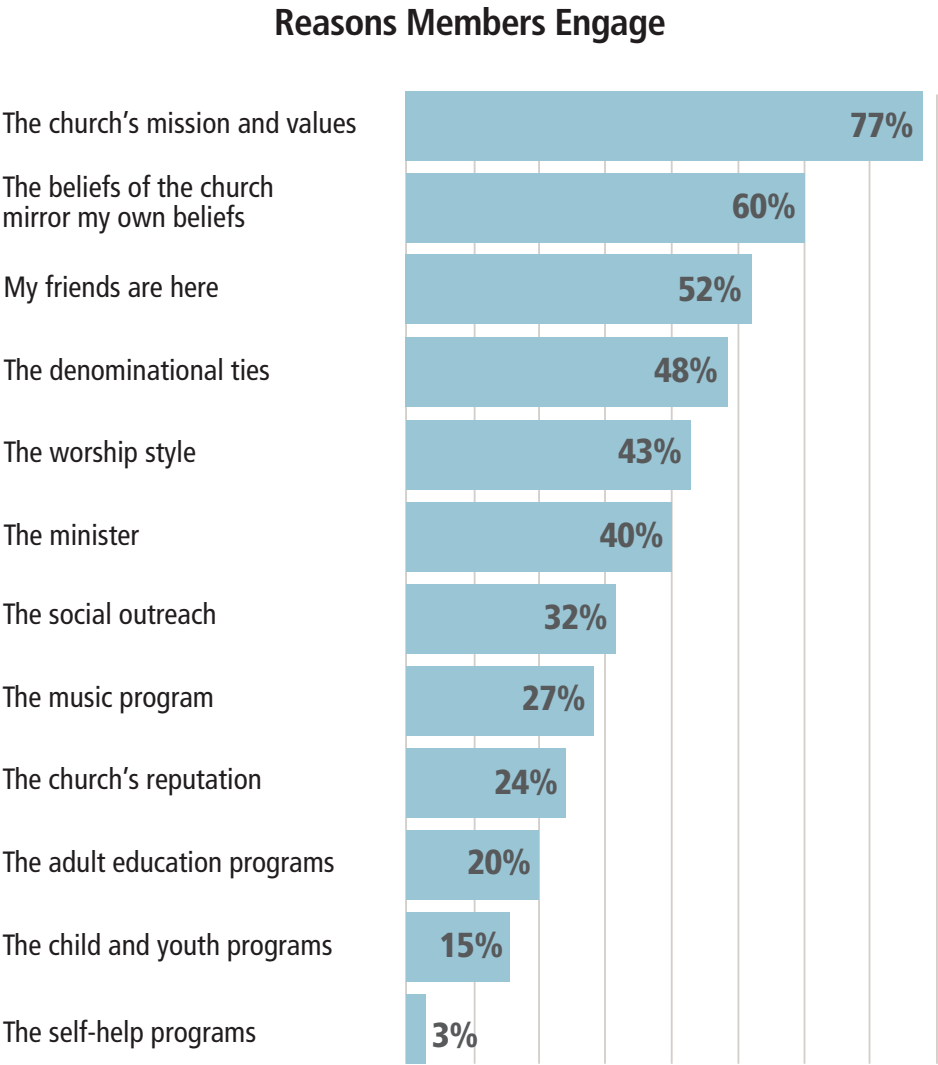
Weekly church attendance is relatively high across regions, with around three-quarters of members in each area attending worship weekly. The highest percentage is in the Midwest (82%), followed by Northeast (80%), South (76%), and West (74%). These numbers have remained relatively consistent since 2005 (Kanagy, 2006). The Northeast and South have seen a slight decrease in the percentage of church members attending worship services every week, 6% and 7%, respectively. The Midwest and West have seen a slight increase in the rate of members who attend church every week, 5% and 3%, respectively.

### Regional Differences in MC USA Members’ Weekly Church Attendance



Almost three-quarters (73%) of MC USA members spend 0–5 hours a week doing congregational-related activities beyond the worship service, and 21% of participants indicate not engaging in congregational activities outside the worship service. Leading services (30%) and preparing services (24%) are the typical activities that members spend their time on outside worship. Weekly tasks that members do for their congregation include preparing for adult groups (23%), youth classes (17%), and choir services (14%).

Members continue to engage with the Anabaptist/Mennonite faith because of the church’s mission and values (77%), because the beliefs of the church mirror their own beliefs (60%), and because their friends are here (52%).

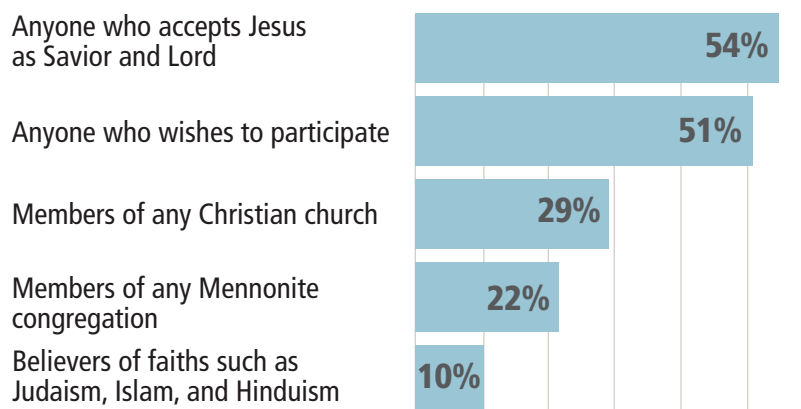


\*Table does not add up to 100% as survey participants were invited to select all that applied.



Just over one-half (54%) of survey participants indicate that anyone who accepts Jesus as Savior and Lord and anyone who wishes to participate (51%) should be allowed to participate in a communion service at their congregation. Nevertheless, current members also suggest that members of any Christian church (29%), members of any Mennonite congregation (22%), and believers of faiths such as Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism (10%) should be allowed to participate in a communion service at their church.

### Inclusion: Who Should Participate?





## 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,

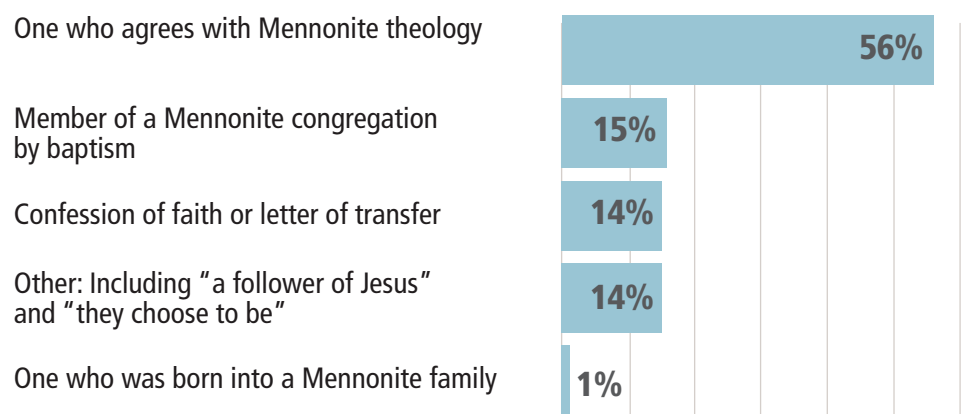
definitions, and understandings that members have about the cultural aspects of being Mennonite, including dimensions such as origin, traditions, practices, norms, language, artifacts, and community. During our discussions with stakeholders, people wanted to know if there was a difference between those 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

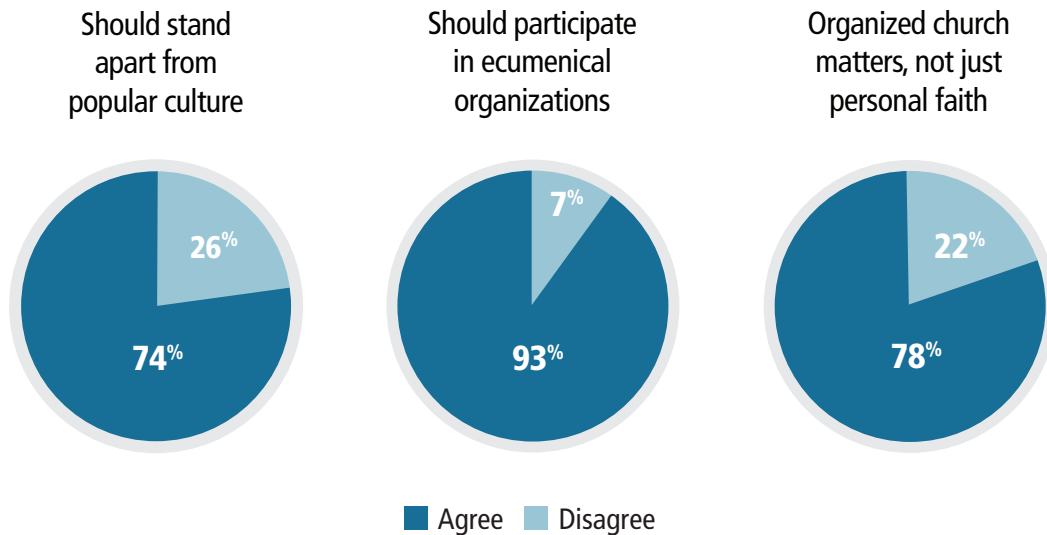
## The Denomination

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**

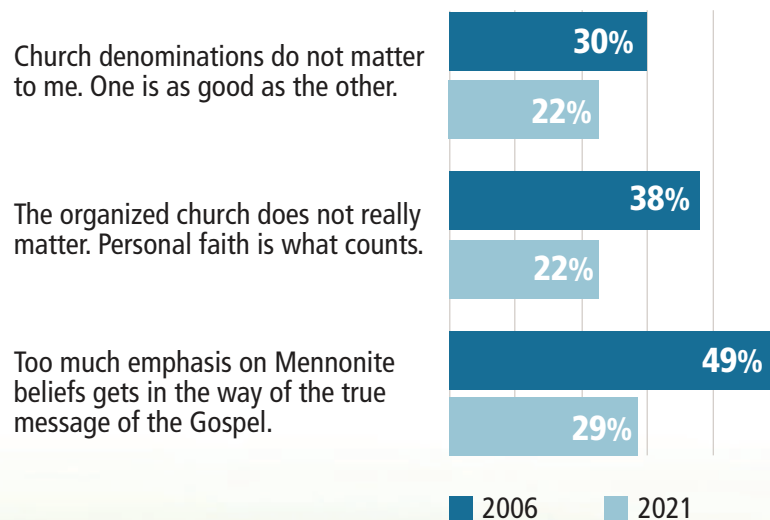




“I think it’s important for the denomination to focus on those things that we do hold in common, and what distinguishes us from other denominations in some ways. At the same time, I will say to continue to work at ecumenical kinds of relationships. So, it’s good to know who we are and how we’re different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

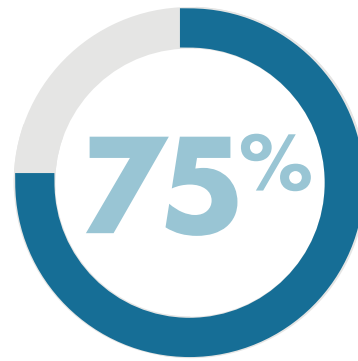


## Spiritually

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.



say religious beliefs are the most important thing in their life.



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

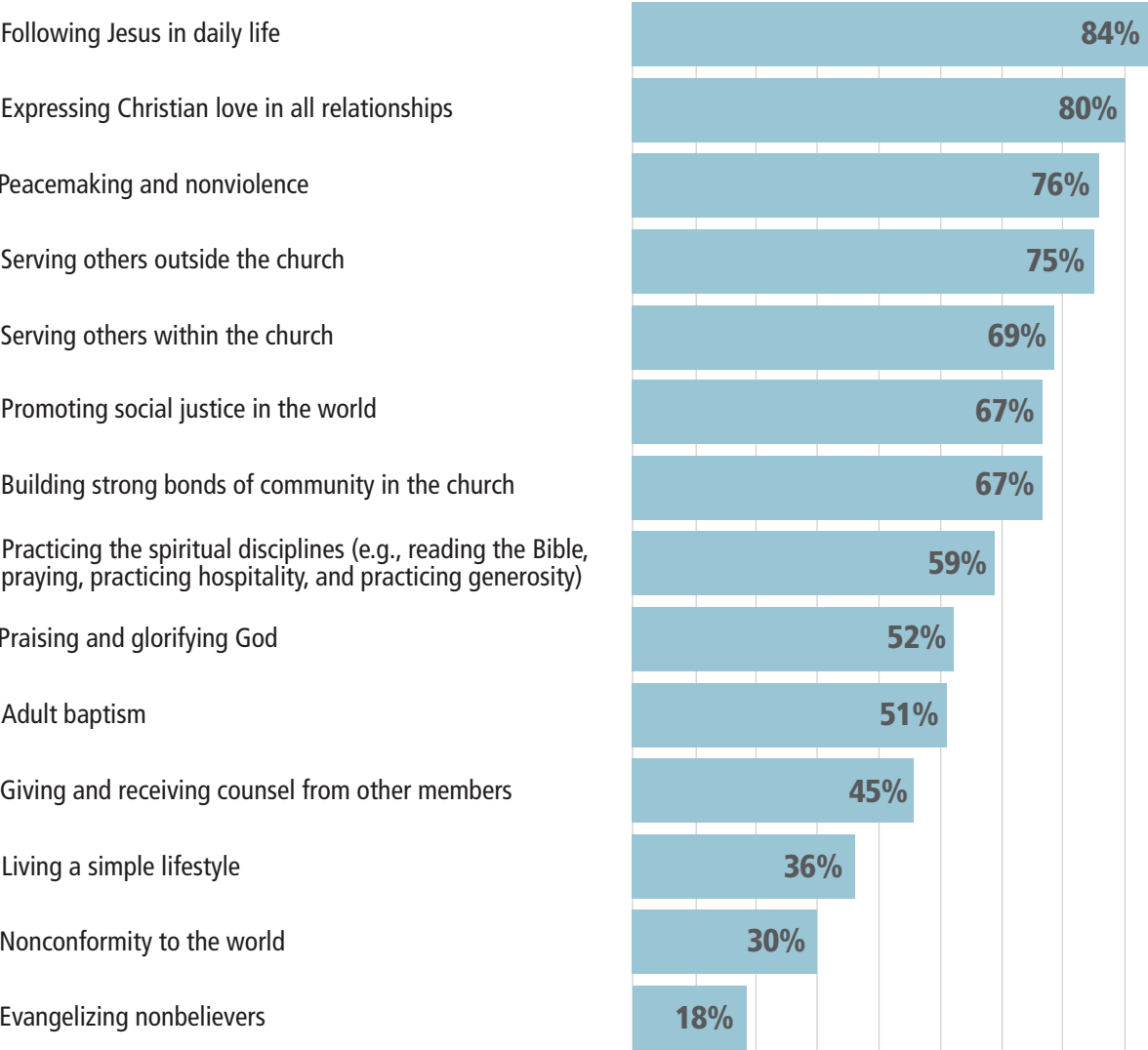
When describing what it means to be Mennonite, members typically point to the tenets of the faith that center around nonviolence, community, and living out their faith. Most MC USA members identify following Jesus in daily life (84%) and expressing Christian love in all relationships (80%) as important 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%).

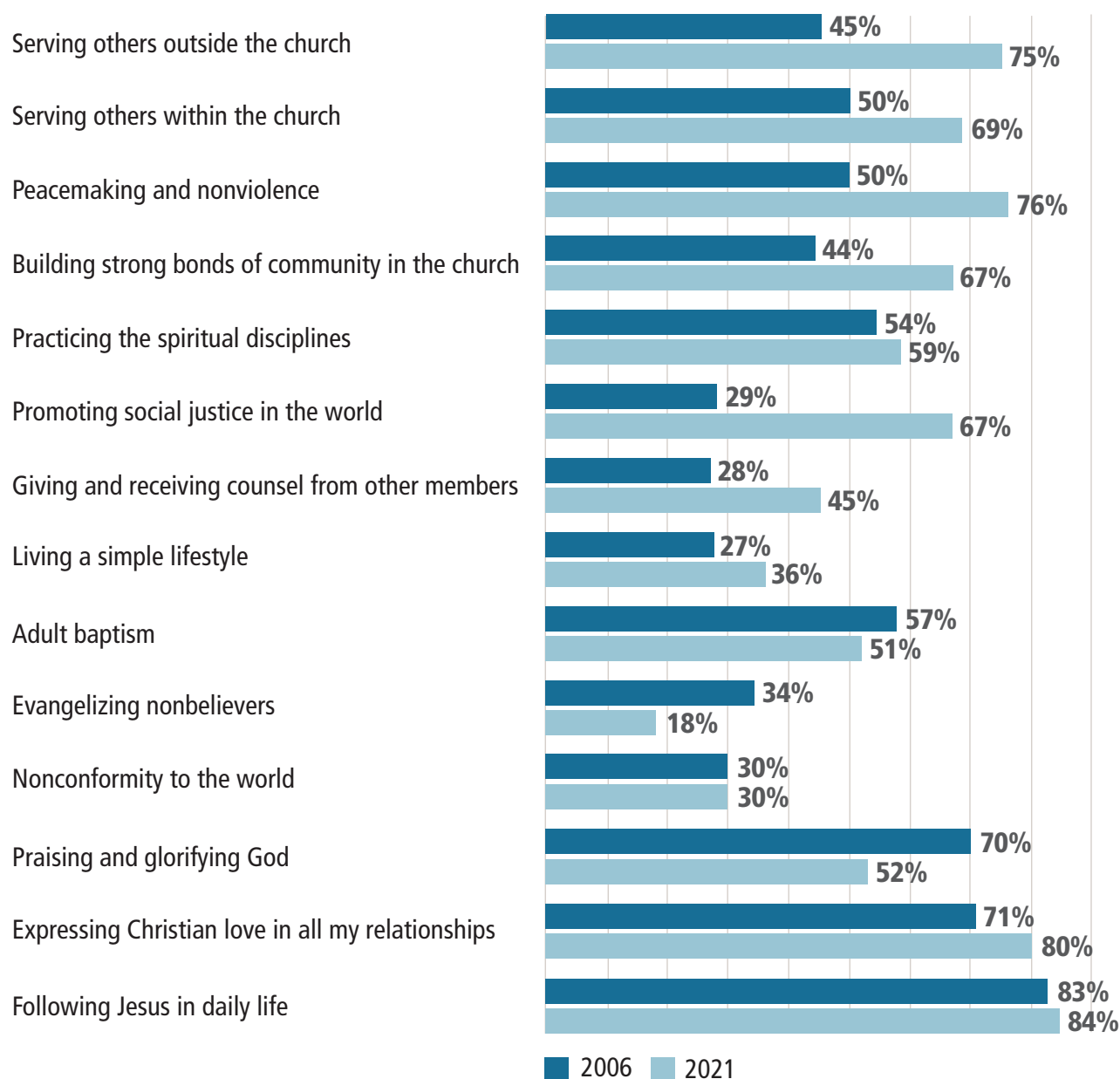
### Personal Faith Commitments

### 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

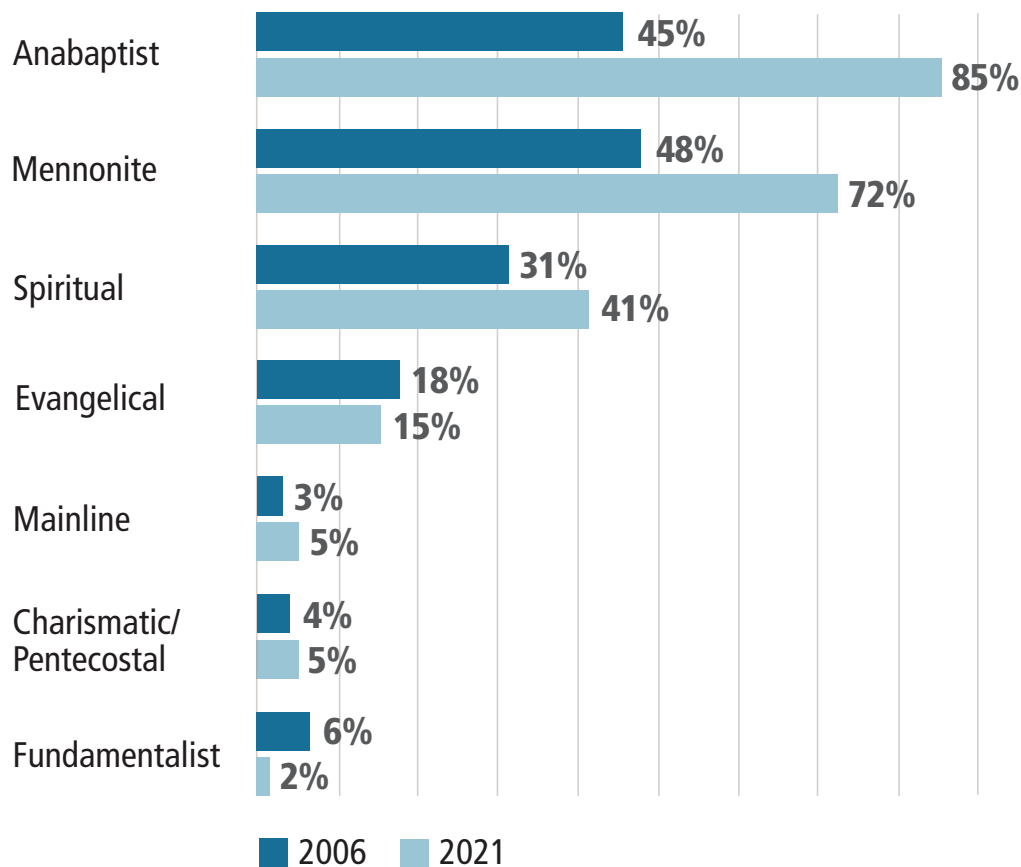




**“[Being Mennonite is] about the community atmosphere. It’s about the rituals that we do together, the rituals of adult baptism, the rituals of hymn singing, the rituals of communion, and so forth, so that community aspect at church. It’s also about that community aspect of fellowship, about the potlucks 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





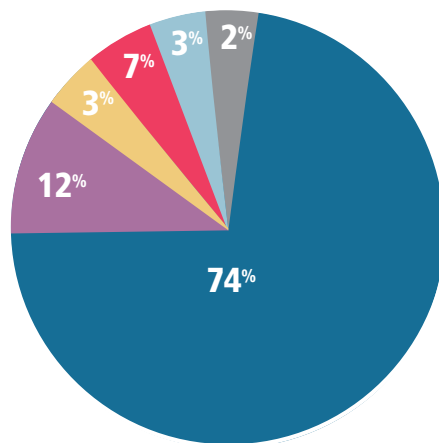
## Chapter 3: Discover Current Members' Experiences and Understanding of MC USA

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.

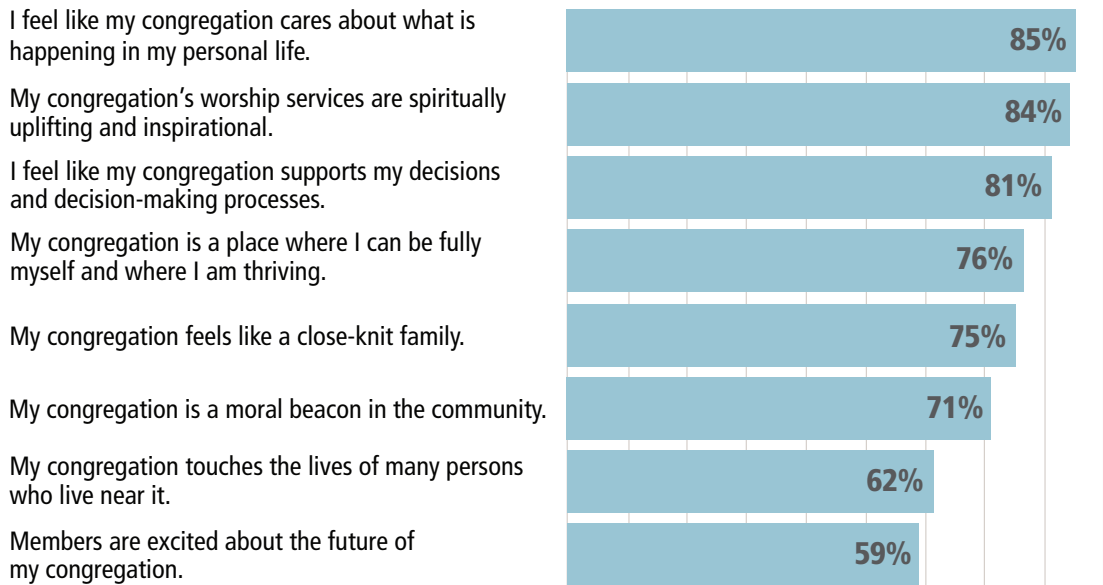
#### Local Churches' Responses to Major Needs of Congregants



- 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

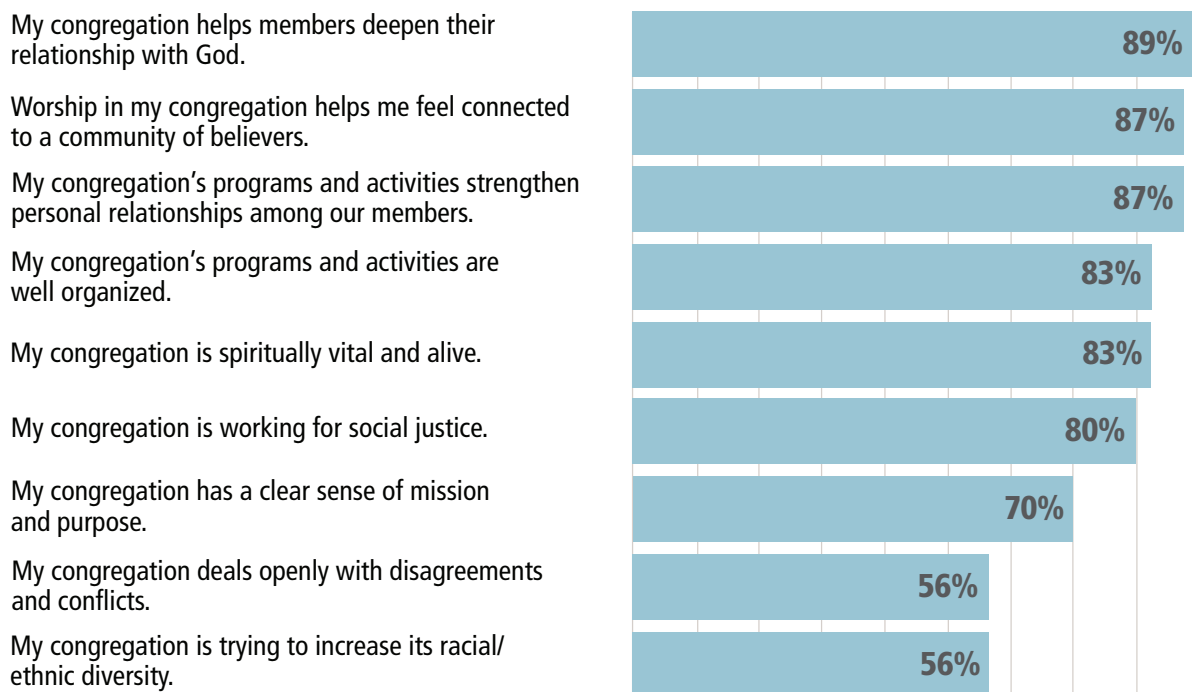


MC USA members share that their congregations help them strengthen their faith through connection, education, and missional engagement. Most participants (89%) agree that their congregation helps members deepen their relationship with God and helps them feel connected to a community of believers (87%).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







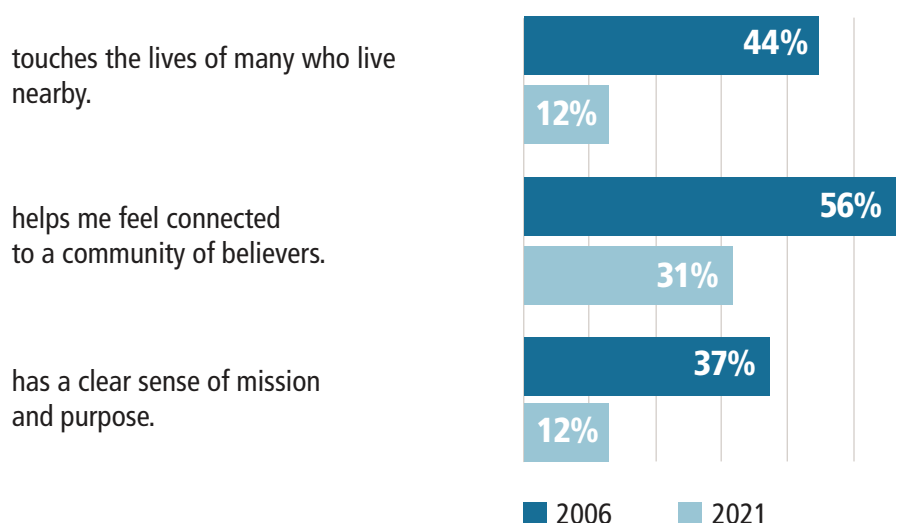
“I think the whole resourcing, being a resource, a place to go for resources, best practices, I think the denomination needs to continue to do that. Frankly, that’s where I think it needs to spend its time and money and focus because the hot button stuff will bubble up. **I think it’s fine if delegates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

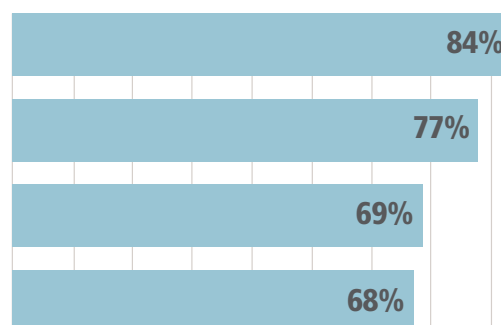
### My Congregation . . .

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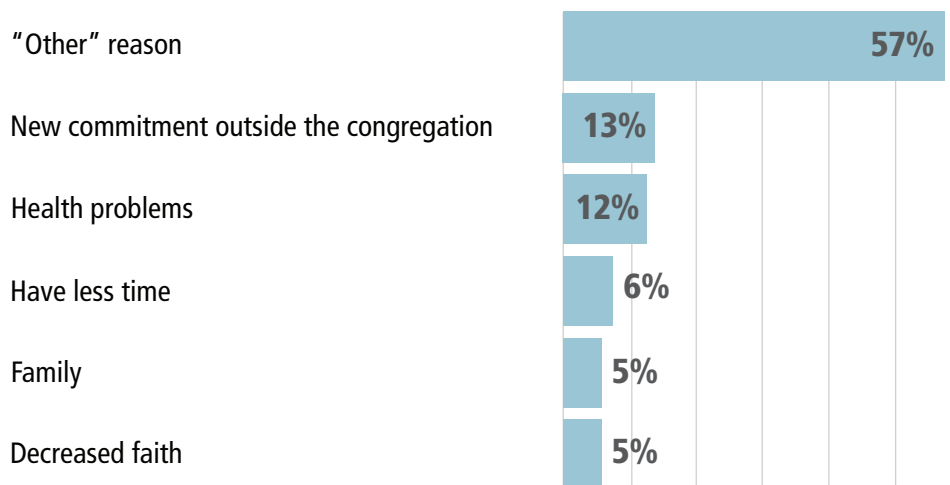
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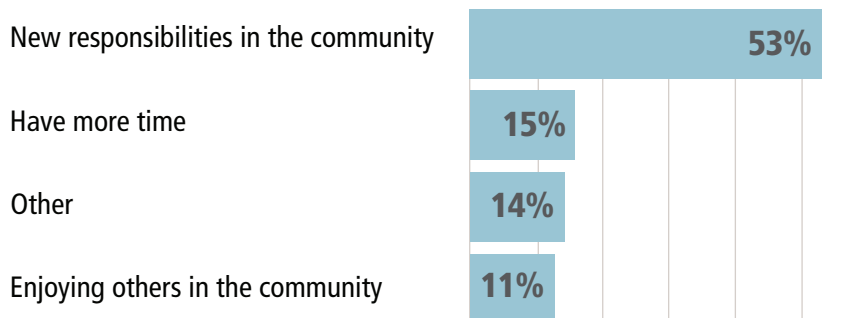
## COVID-19

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



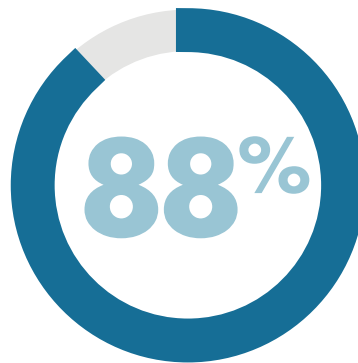
### Reasons for Increased Congregational Involvement





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.

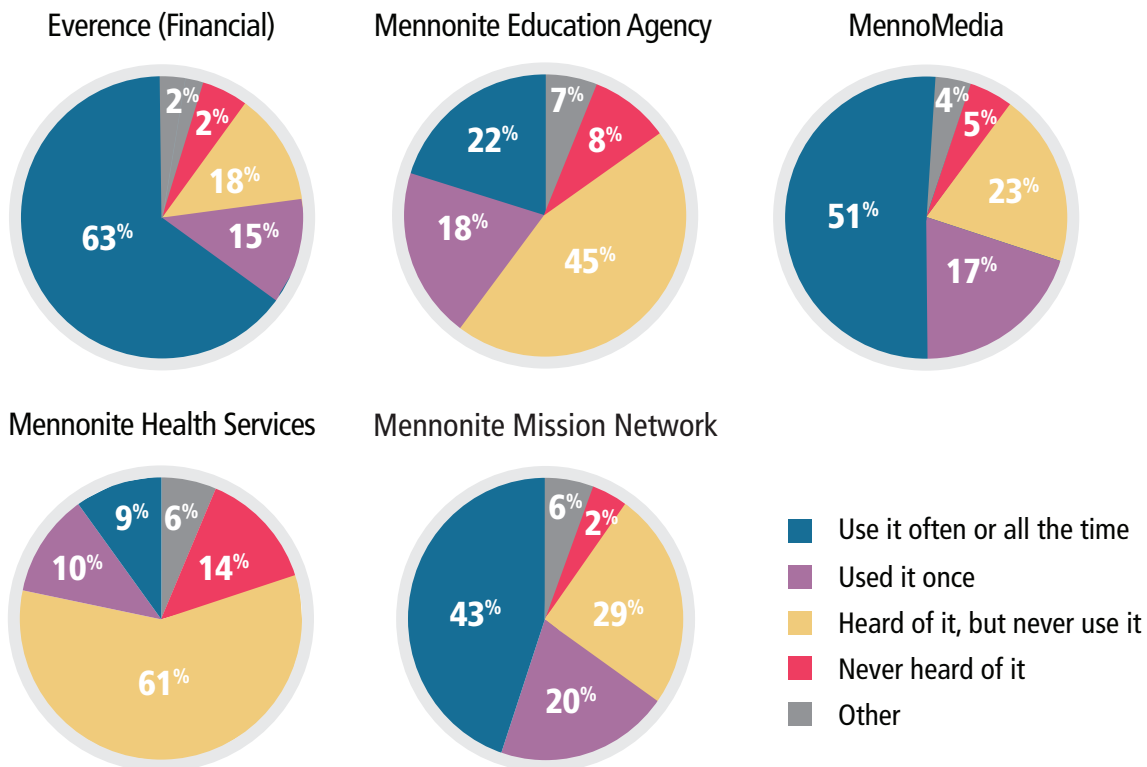
Largely, people are committed to the mission of the denomination. When asked about understanding the mission of MC USA, the majority of members (52%) indicate they relate to it well enough, with 63% agreeing that MC USA consistently promotes the missions of the denomination, and 74% indicating that it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





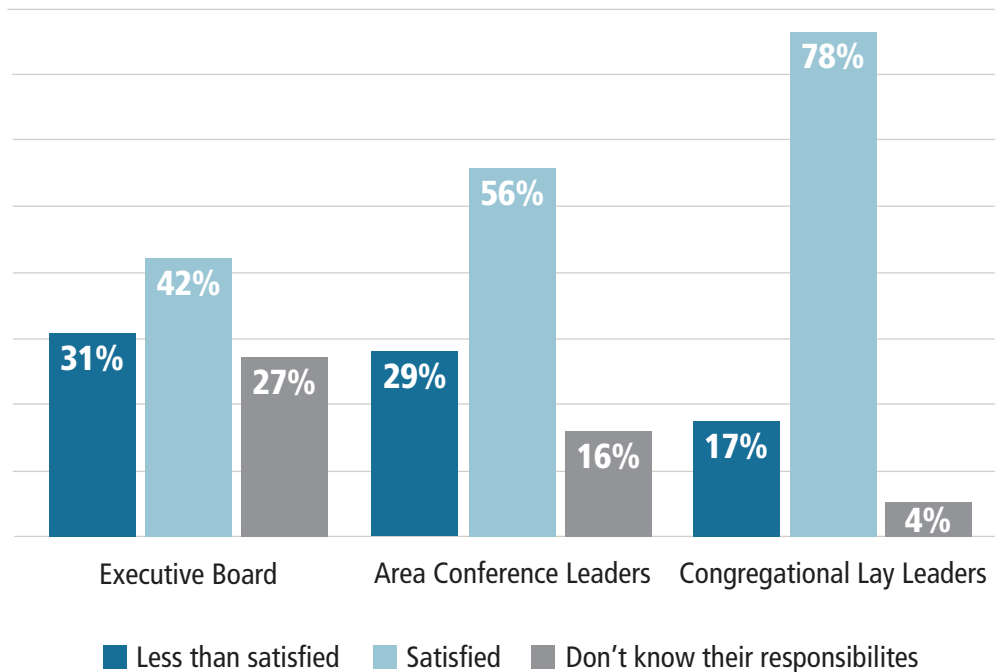
## Leadership

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

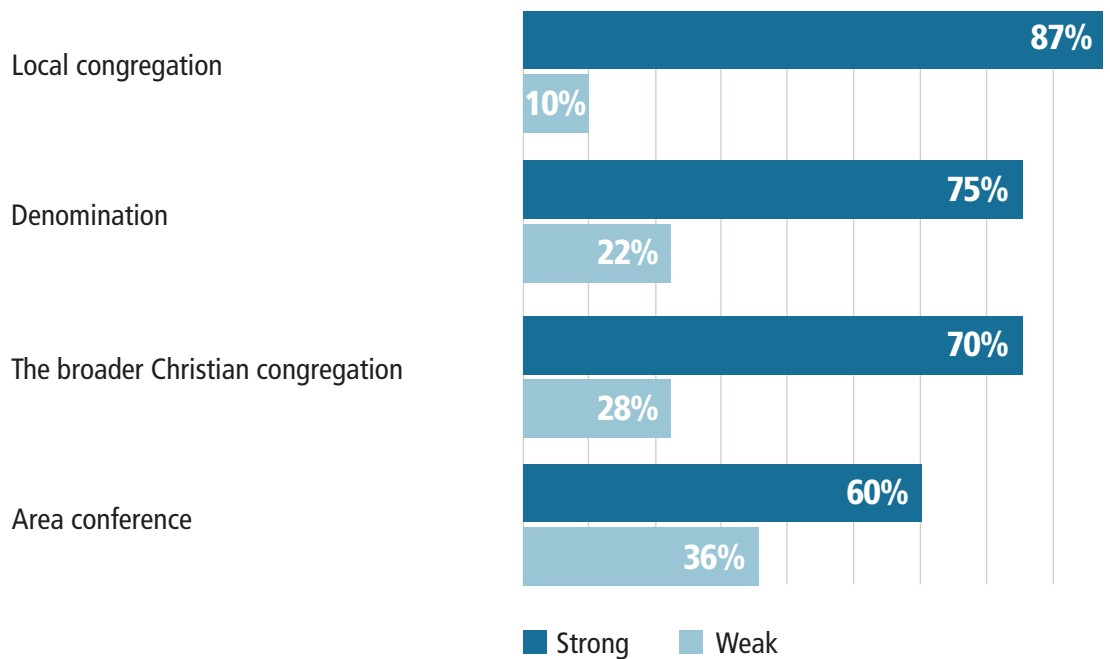
**“I think leadership is doing a tremendous job, given the political climate of this country right now, given what is happening within the church itself, I’ve been very impressed and happy with where things are.** And, at least speaking for myself, there’s nothing that springs to mind immediately in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



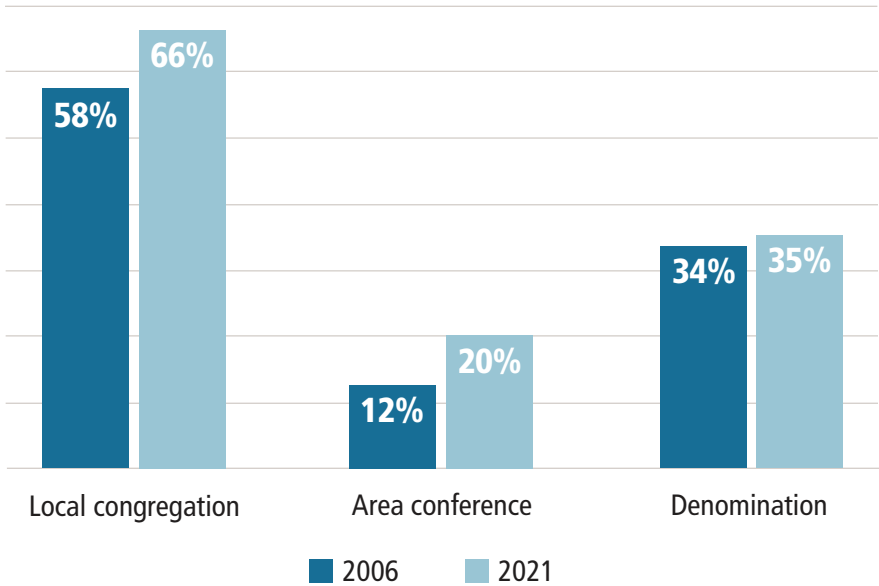
Unsurprisingly, current MC USA members also have mixed levels of personal commitment to different organizational bodies within the faith. Most participants indicate a strong tie with the local congregation (87%), followed by the denomination (75%), the broader Christian congregation (70%), and then the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





## 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





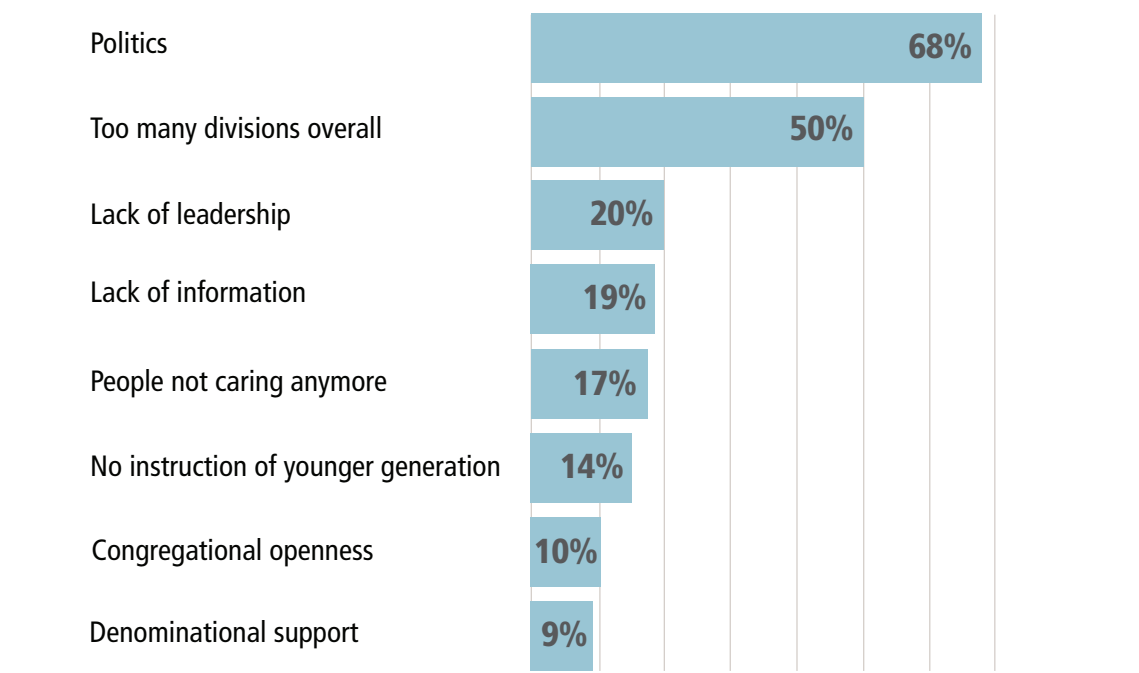
Mennonites do not exist in a vacuum. Societal issues influence philosophical divisions among members and, ultimately, within the denomination. The majority of MC USA members select politics (68%) and too many divisions overall (50%) as the issues affecting congregations' ability to live out the core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

“It’s easier to talk about [external cultural things] 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



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

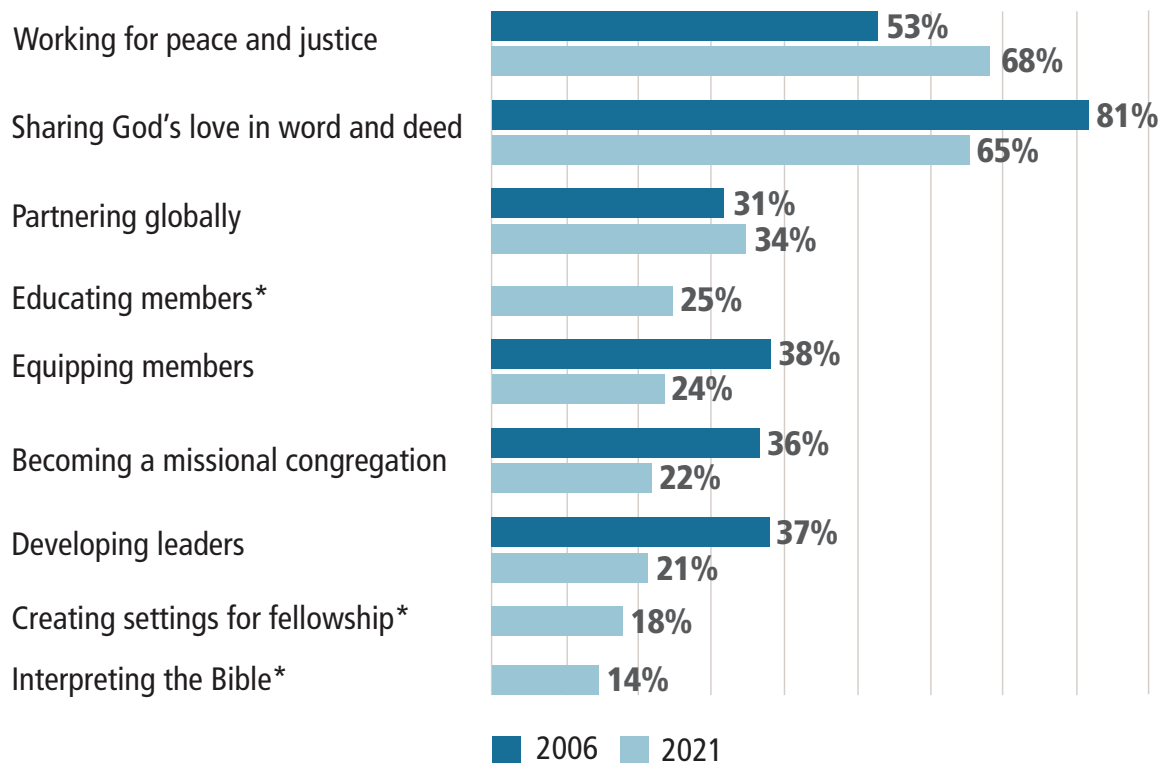
**“I’m 23 years old and so many of my peers that I grew up with or . . . met in college, who also grew up in Mennonite churches, are not interested in being part of MC USA. And I feel like there’s so many reasons for that, but I do feel like the lack of . . . political stances the church has taken are 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.

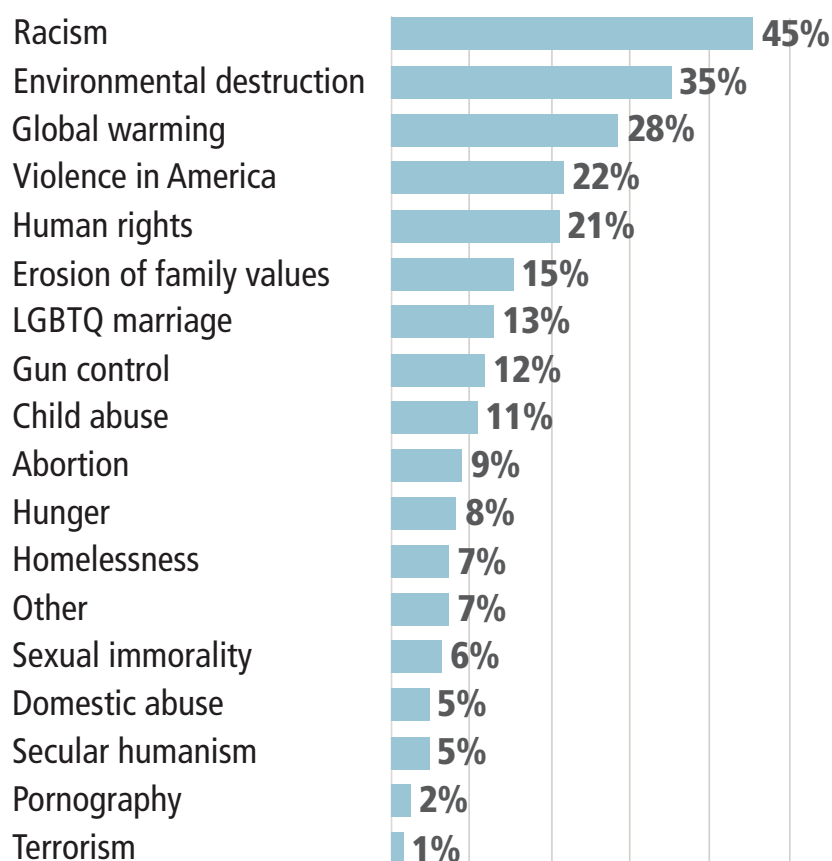
Across the board, participants agree that outreach is important (88%). More specifically, 53% indicate that outreach is important and worth doing, and 24% suggest that it is very important and that more efforts should be made to increase outreach, and 11% say outreach is essential. The preferred mode 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





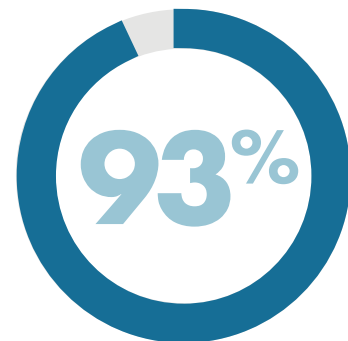
Major cultural issues continue to cause division within the denomination despite current members indicating that exclusion is at odds with being Mennonite. Fully 70% of participants say that excluding people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or any other identity is inherently at odds with what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



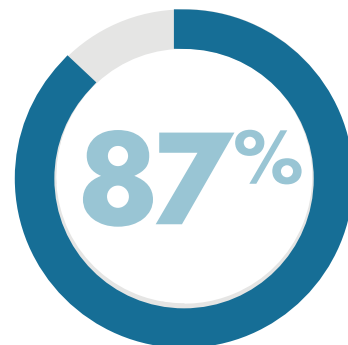
MC USA members identify inclusivity and representation as key in the Mennonite faith. Most members (83%) agree that part of peacemaking is being inclusive of *all* people. Most members (86%) also indicate that it is essential for MC USA leadership to represent the denominational body. Only 6% of participants 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

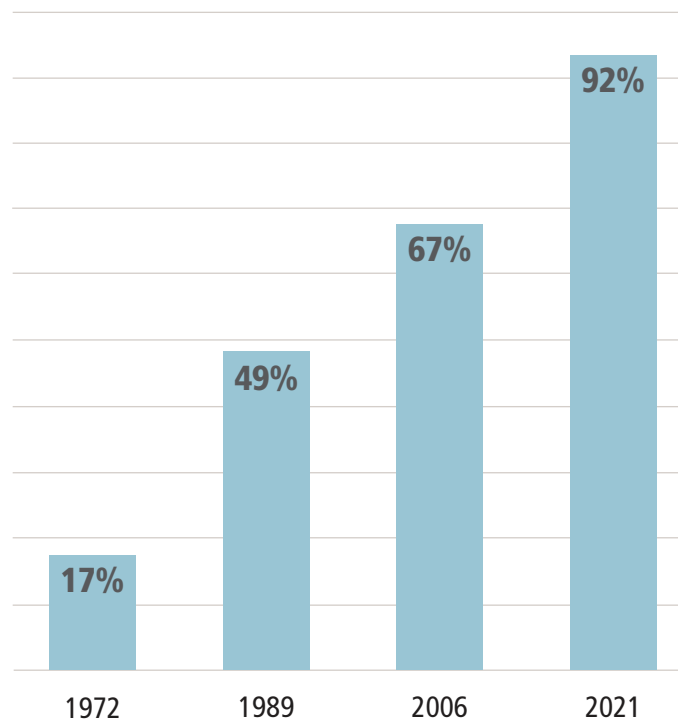




Gender is also part of the conversations about change in the denomination. While 55% of respondents are part of congregations with an accessible, public policy to address sexual misconduct, almost one-third do not know if their congregation has a policy (32%), and 7% indicate that their congregation 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**

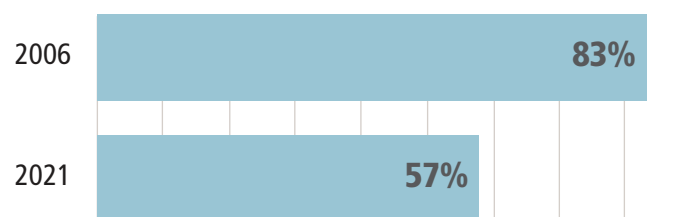




## Guidelines and Polity

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

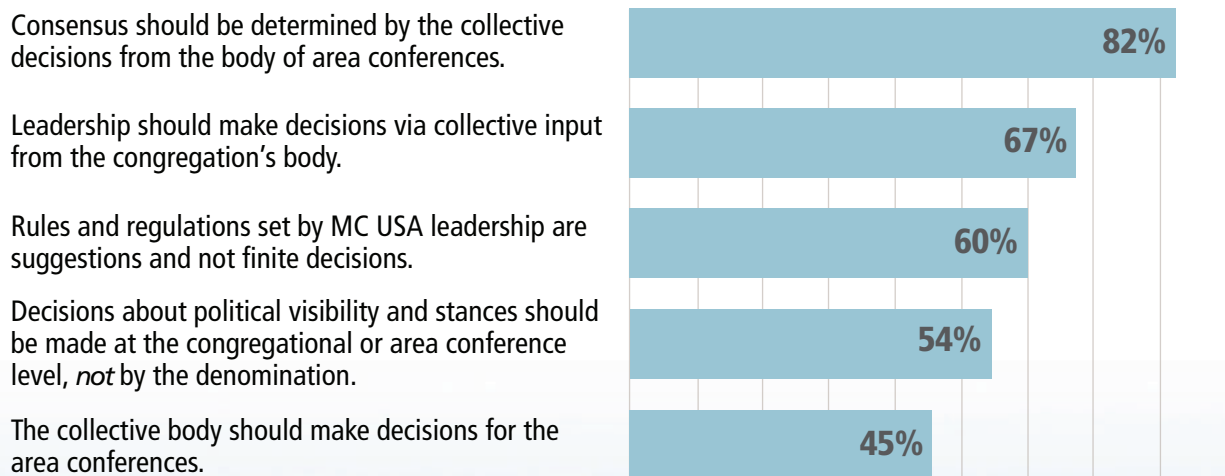




Members more consistently agree on supporting congregational autonomy and community decision-making. Over one-half of members (54%) agree that decisions about political visibility and stances should be made at the congregational or area conference level, *not* by the denomination. Regarding polity, only 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



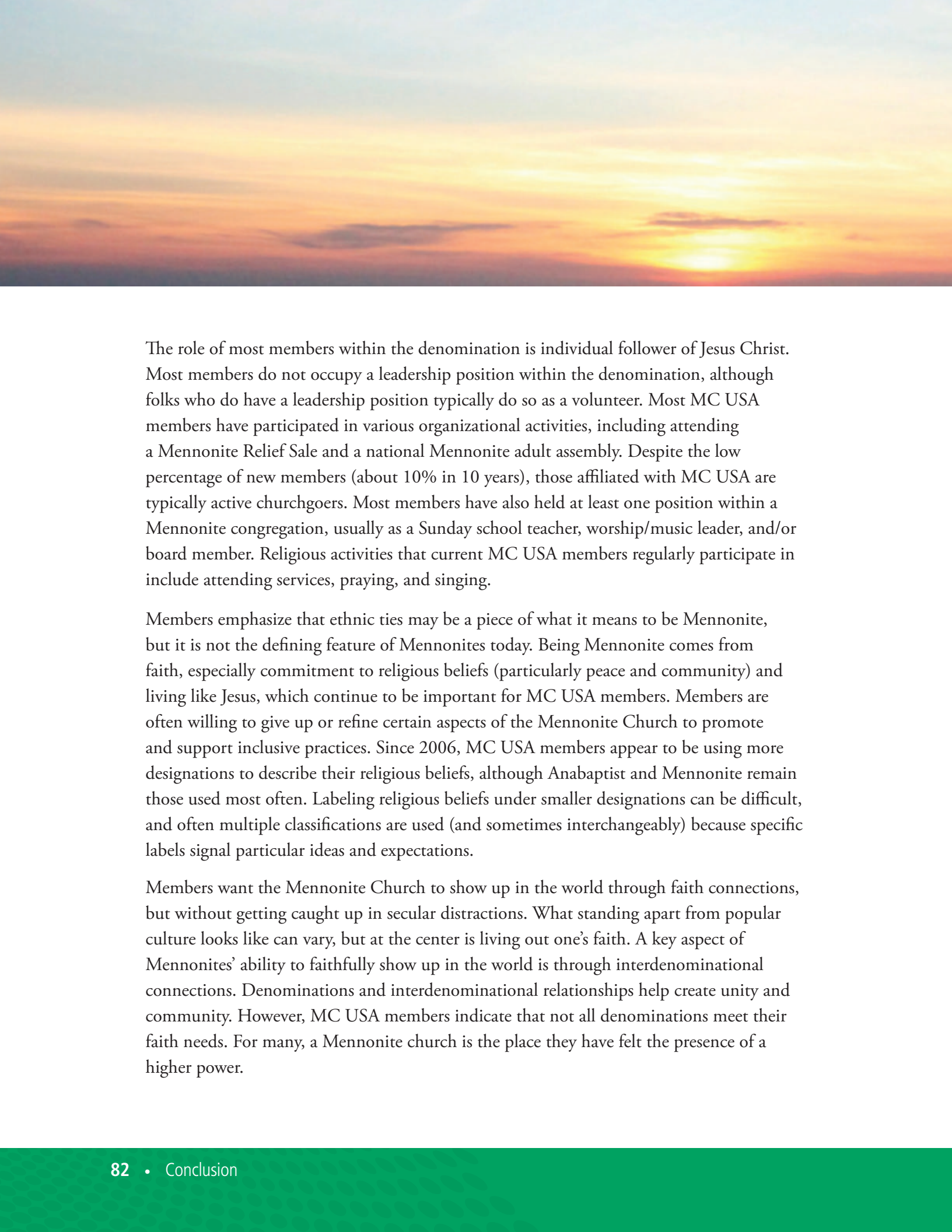


# Conclusion



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.

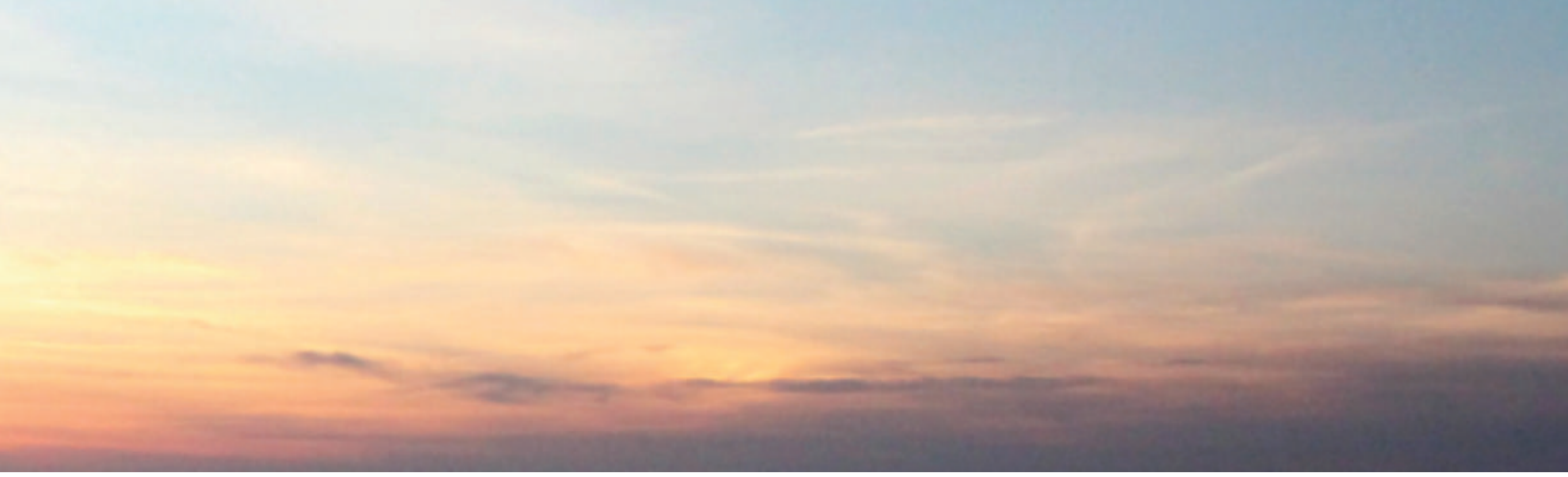
The top half of the page features a photograph of a sunset. The sun is a bright, glowing orb positioned slightly to the right of the center, partially obscured by a thin layer of clouds. The sky is a gradient of colors, from a pale blue at the top to a deep orange and red near the horizon. The bottom half of the page is a solid green bar.

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.

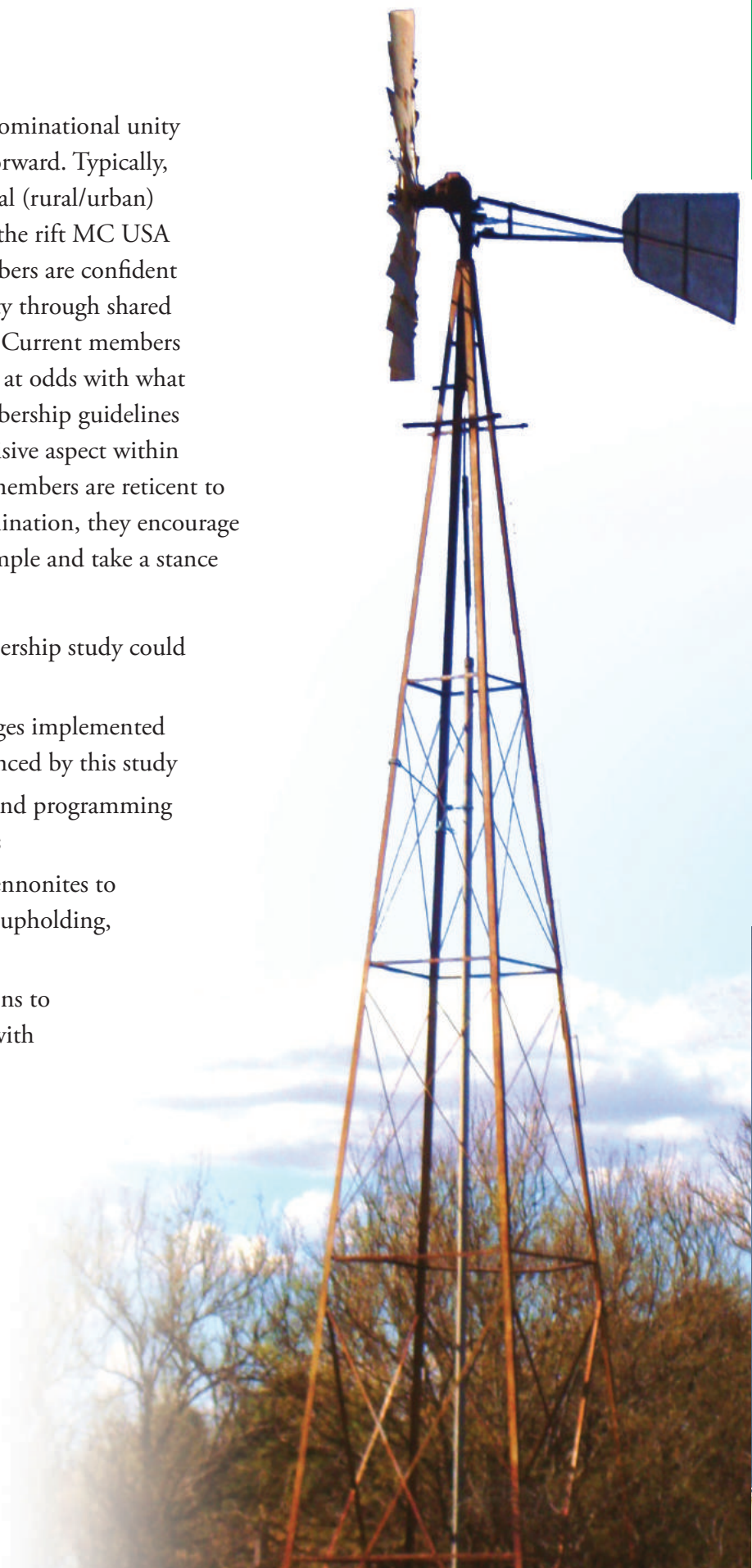
MC USA members are generally aware of various services offered by the denomination, and those who use services typically find them advantageous. Agencies and organizations that MC USA is affiliated with are an important feature of the denomination through which members find connection. However, respondents 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

