



# The Menonite Experience:

MC USA Membership Study 2021–22



## What story does this data tell?

Springtide Research Institute® designed and conducted a custom study for the Mennonite Church USA (MC USA), including a survey of members to establish basic demographics, interviews with volunteer survey respondents in order 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 full synthesized analysis, and develop the findings 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 members 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.

## 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.

## Interviews

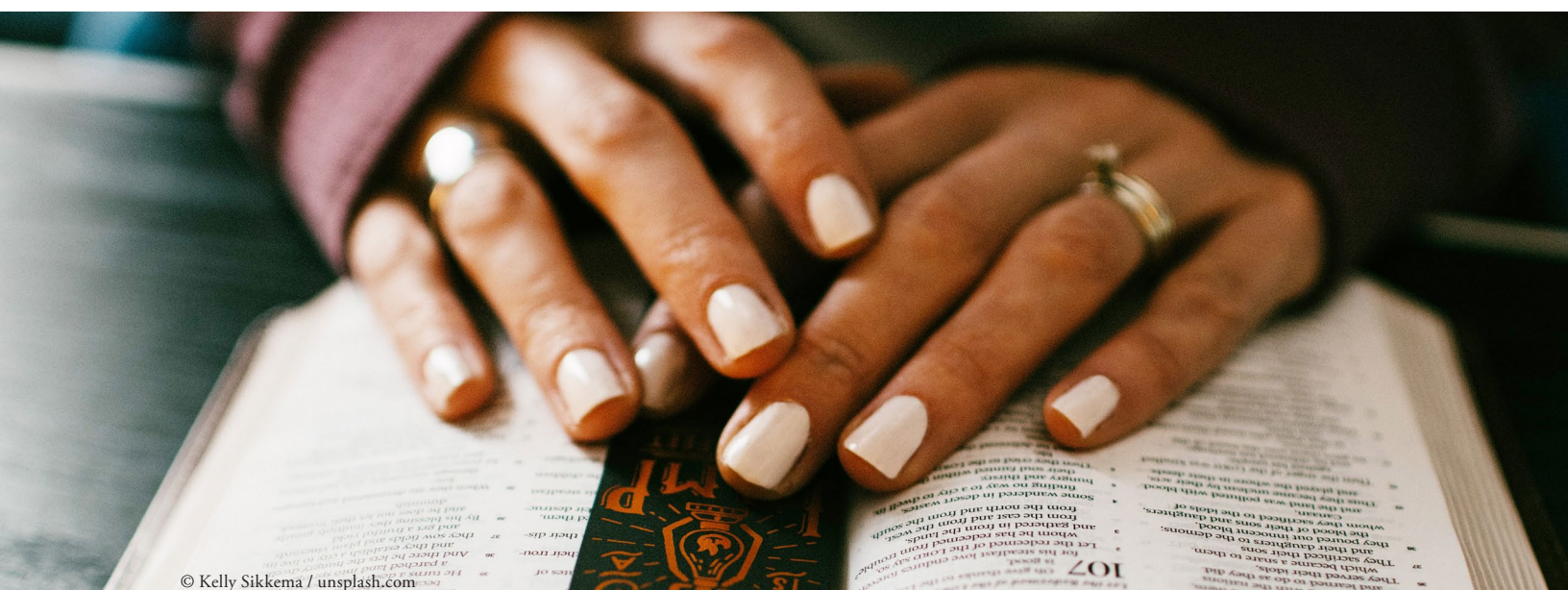
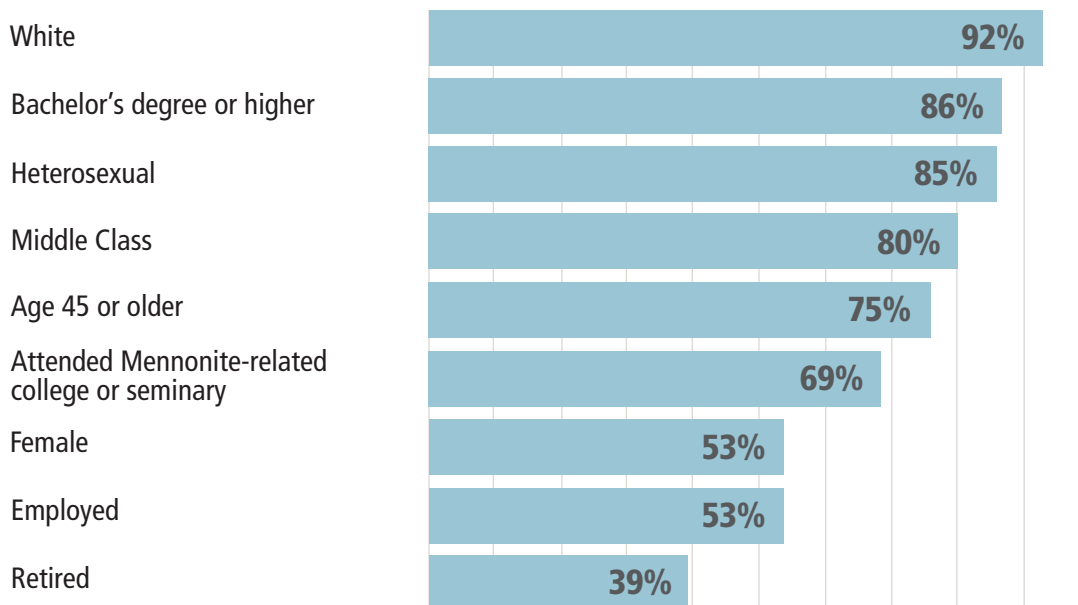
We interviewed 63 members who opted in during the survey for a follow-up interview to better understand their experiences as Mennonites by listening to their beliefs about what it means to be Mennonite today, their experiences with MC USA generally, and where they would like to see the denomination moving 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.

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

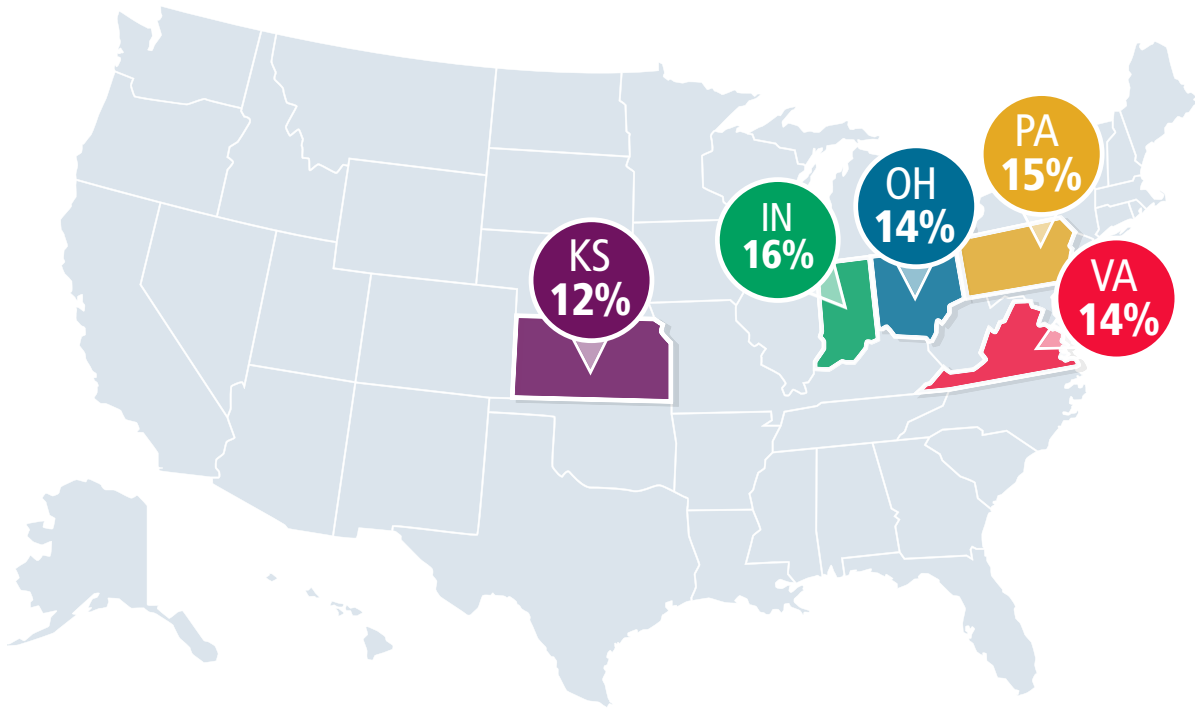
## General

Most survey participants self-identify as white (92%), female (53%), heterosexual (85%), and 45 years of age and older (75%). Participants typically have a bachelor's degree or higher (86%), consider themselves middle class (80%), have attended a Mennonite-related college or seminary (69%), and are employed (53%) or retired (39%). While this may not be entirely representative of the MC USA population, it is the snapshot of those who are engaged, given that they opted into the study at all.

### Snapshot of Survey Participants (majority)

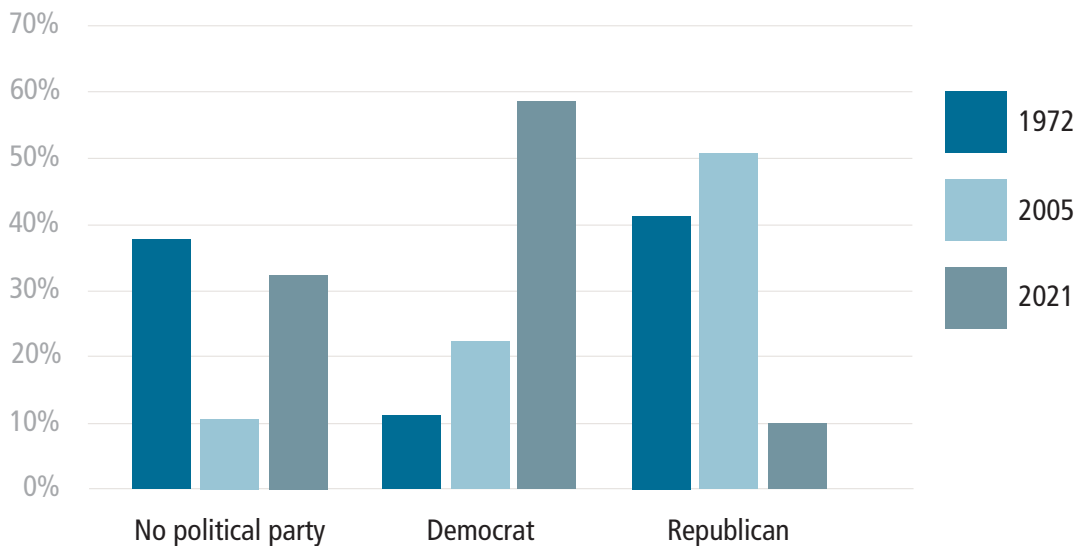


Two-thirds of Mennonites in the US reside in five states: Indiana (16%), Pennsylvania (15%), Ohio (14%), Kansas (12%), and Virginia (14%). Members are similarly spread across small cities (25%), open country/farmland (24%), and small towns (20%).



As the chart (below) shows, the percentage of MC USA members who identify as Democrat or no political party (including independent, other, and none) has doubled since 2006. The percentage who identify as Republican has dropped significantly.

### Political Party Affiliation of MC USA Members



## Mennonite-Specific

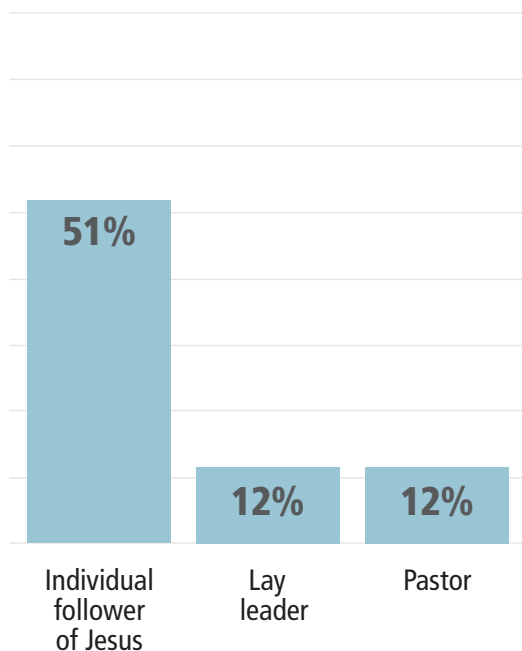
Most participants (74%) grew up attending a Mennonite congregation, and most members (76%) are active members of their congregation. Before the pandemic, almost all (90%) participants attended worship weekly or more. During the pandemic, most of these members shifted to virtual attendance weekly or more (80%).

### Members' Attendance

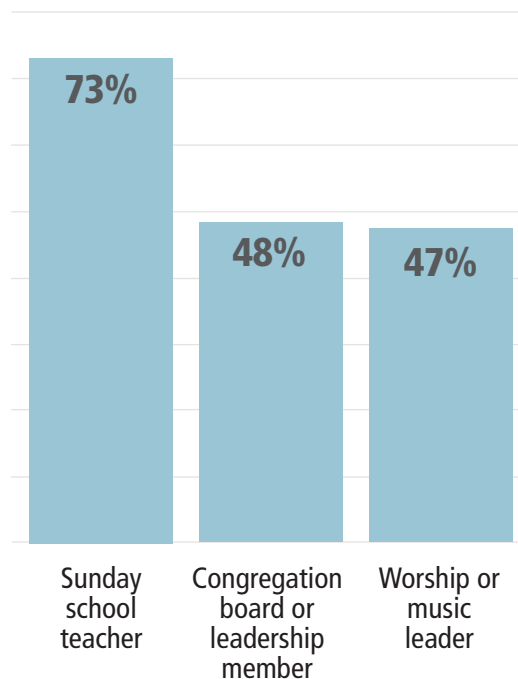


The most common roles within MC USA are individual follower of Jesus Christ (51%), lay leader (12%), and pastor (12%). The most common lay positions held by MC USA members include Sunday school teacher (73%), congregation board or leadership member (48%), and worship or music leader (47%). MC USA members have also participated in many denomination-related activities, including attending a Mennonite relief sale (86%), attending a national Mennonite adult assembly (64%), and serving as a delegate to a national Mennonite assembly (37%).

### Roles within MC USA

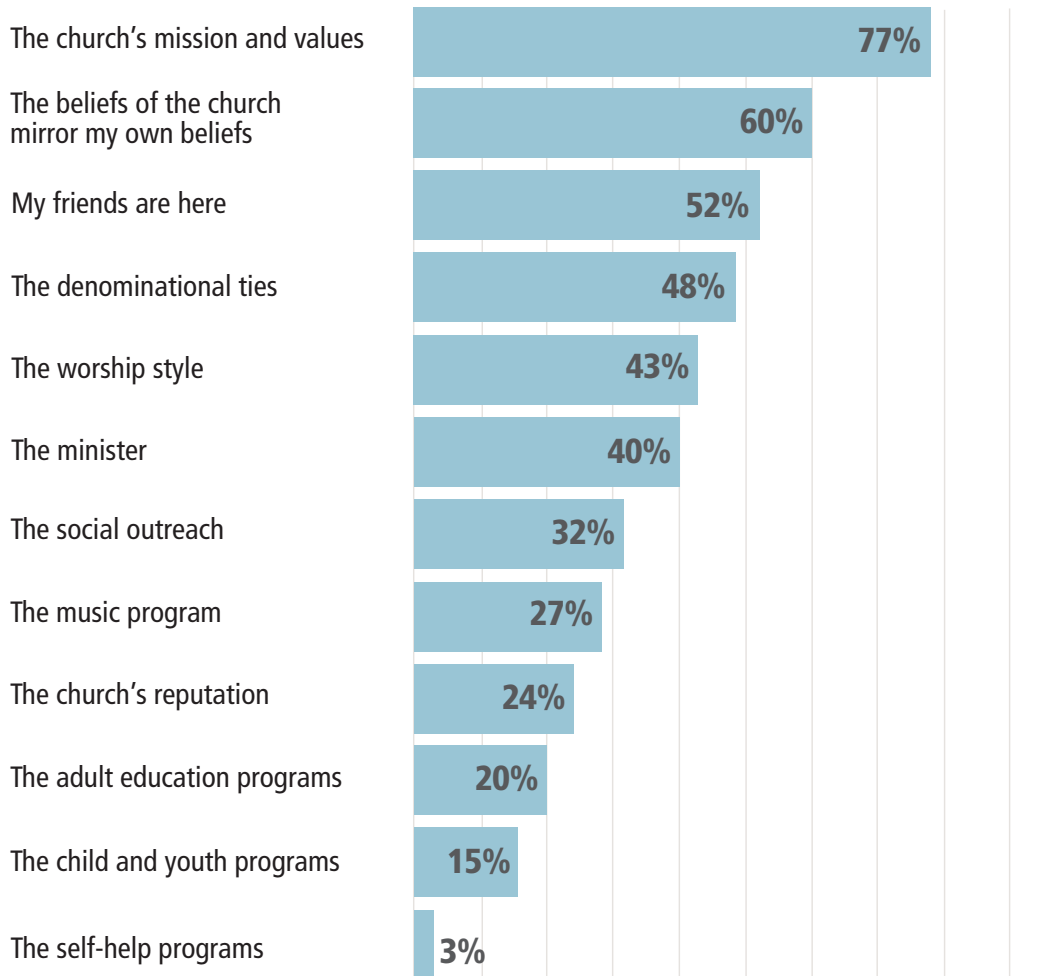


### Common Lay Positions within MC USA



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%).

### Members Engage because . . .



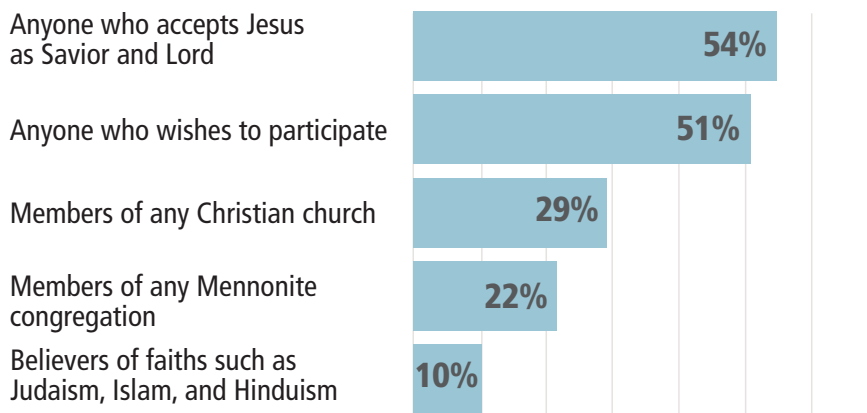
\*Table does not add up to 100% as survey participants were invited to select all that applied.



The number of MC USA members that have been part of a non-Mennonite denomination has risen steadily over the years. In 1972, only 14% of Mennonites came from “other than Mennonite denominations” (Kanagy, 2006). Today, just over one-third (36%) of survey participants have been members of a non-Mennonite congregation, and 15% have been a member of a non-Mennonite congregation many times.

Just over one-half of survey participants indicate that anyone who accepts Jesus as Savior and Lord (54%) and anyone who wishes to participate (51%) should be allowed to participate in a communion service at their congregation. 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?

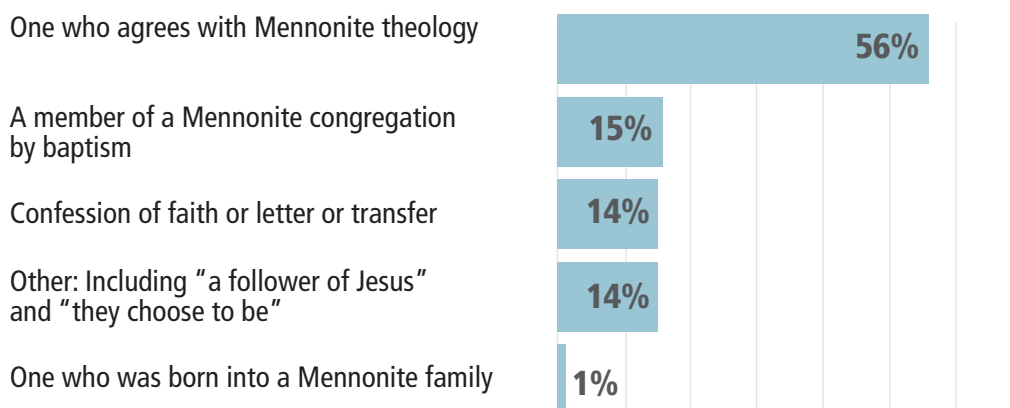


## Objective 2: Determine what being Mennonite means, both culturally and spiritually.

### Culturally

Participants acknowledge the historical significance of cultural traditions but emphasize that this limits growth and diversity by alienating non-cradle Mennonites. Though 73% grew up with both parents identifying as members, only 1% of survey respondents define *Mennonite* as, “someone born into a Mennonite family”; whereas 56% define *Mennonite* as “one who agrees with Mennonite theology.”

#### Who Is a Mennonite?



Those we spoke to about this concept provide more context about how people are increasingly viewing “being Mennonite.” The quotes below capture how a growing number of Mennonites feel about this identity.

“I call it Mennonites-by-choice. And I think that ethnic Mennonites have to be Mennonites-by-choice.” — Daniel

“I think Mennonites today are people who attend a Mennonite church, and they’re part of a Mennonite faith community.” — Jude

Members suggest making concessions or changes to traditions to promote and support inclusive practices.

“And frankly, I might be happy to let some [Mennonite traditions] go if it was for the sake of embracing and benefiting a diversity of cultures and voices within the church.”  
— Aimee

“Can’t we make space in our congregation for multiple cultures in an intercultural way with give and take, rather than saying you have to become [a specific ethnicity]?” — Derrick



“Can’t we make space in our congregation for multiple cultures in an intercultural way with give and take, rather than saying you have to become [a specific ethnicity]?” — Derrick

Members want the Mennonite church to show up in the world through faith connections without getting caught up in secular concerns. 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 matters, regardless of the denomination, and not just personal faith. Most members agree that the church should clearly stand apart from popular culture (74%). 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



“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

“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.

One member shared that he was closer to God in his first experience with a Mennonite congregation than with other denominations.

“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.” — Mitch

## Spiritually

Commitment to religious beliefs and living out their faith are important to MC USA members. The majority (55%) said their religious beliefs were very important, and 29% said they were the most important thing in their life. Identical to Kanagy’s (2007) findings, three-quarters of MC USA members (75%) indicate that the most important reason for peacemaking is Jesus’s life and teaching as a peacemaker.

“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

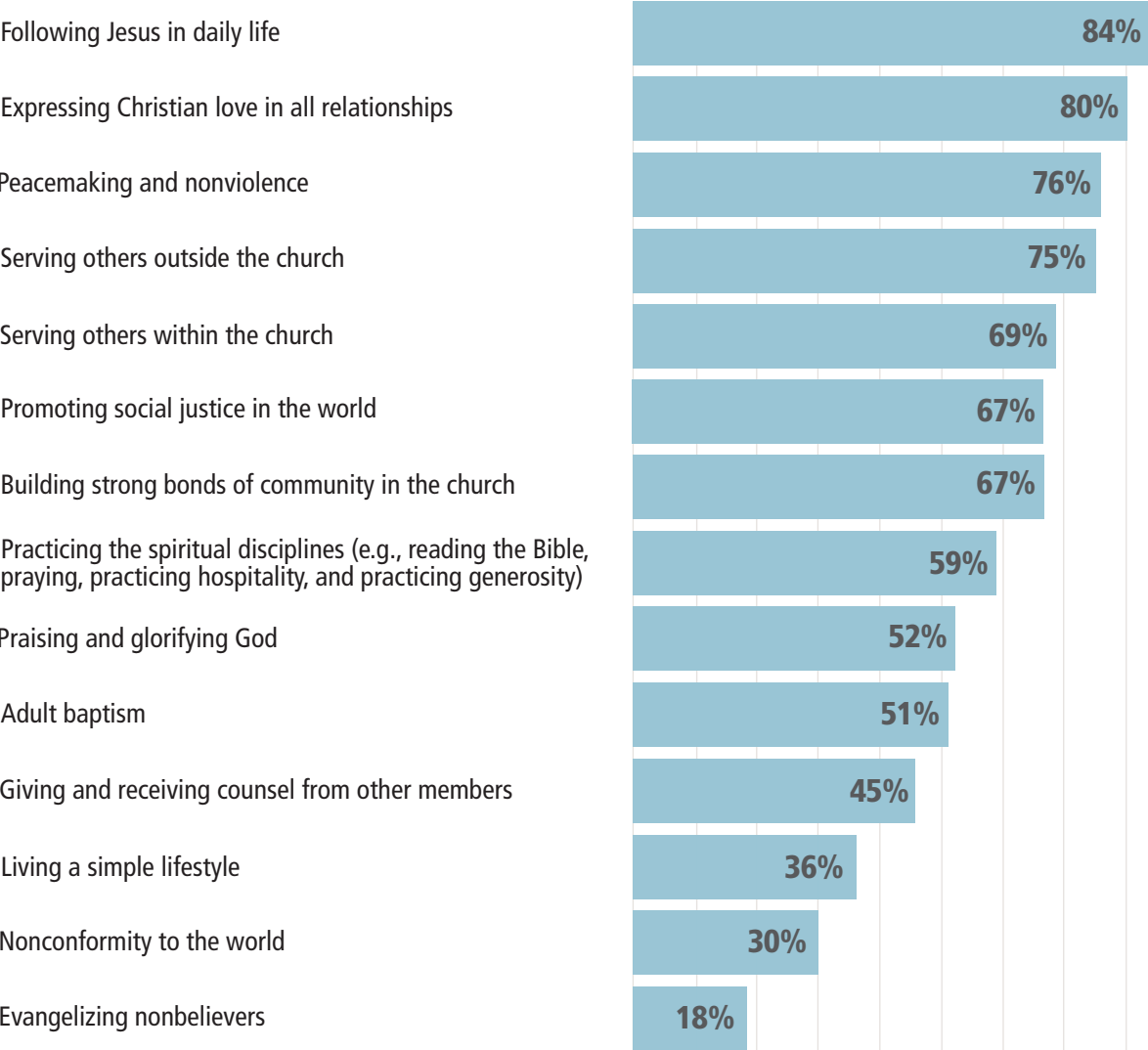
“The issues that we have, all those issues, are symptoms of how we read the Scriptures. And I think we need to have some real integrity and honest, open discussion, not so much teaching, on how we approach Scripture.” — Bill


When identifying behaviors that embody 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. The table below highlights the percentages of people who indicate the importance of these personal faith commitment behaviors at a high level. Most MC USA members identify following Jesus in daily life (84%) and expressing Christian love in all relationships (80%) as very important personal faith commitments.

“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

**Personal Faith Commitments**

**Selected “Very Important”**





“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

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

## Terminology

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%) were used most often to describe their religious beliefs.

“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 . . . can often signal perhaps larger theological connections.” — Tiffany

“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

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## Recommendations and Considerations for Action

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. Offering clear opportunities to serve those outside the church and to express Christian love will make people feel more connected and engaged. MC USA should work to balance tradition and 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. Additionally, MC USA should continue to provide resources and networks to further develop intradenominational and interdenominational connections.

# Objective 3: Discover members' experiences and understanding of MC USA.

## At the congregational level

MC USA–affiliated congregations provide ample support to their members and the surrounding community. Around three-quarters of members (74%) have witnessed the local church helping people with real needs. Likewise, most of the participants agree that their congregation cares about what is happening in their personal lives (85%) and is supportive of their decisions (81%). Furthermore, nearly three-quarters of participants indicate that the majority of members see their local congregations as a moral beacon for the community (71%) and believe their congregation touches the lives of many who live nearby (62%).

### Perceptions of Congregation

I feel like my congregation cares about what is happening in my personal life.

85%

My congregation's worship services are spiritually uplifting and inspirational.

84%

I feel like my congregation supports my decisions and decision-making processes.

81%

My congregation feels like a close-knit family.

75%

My congregation is a moral beacon in the community.

71%

My congregation touches the lives of many persons who live near it.

62%

Members are excited about the future of my congregation.

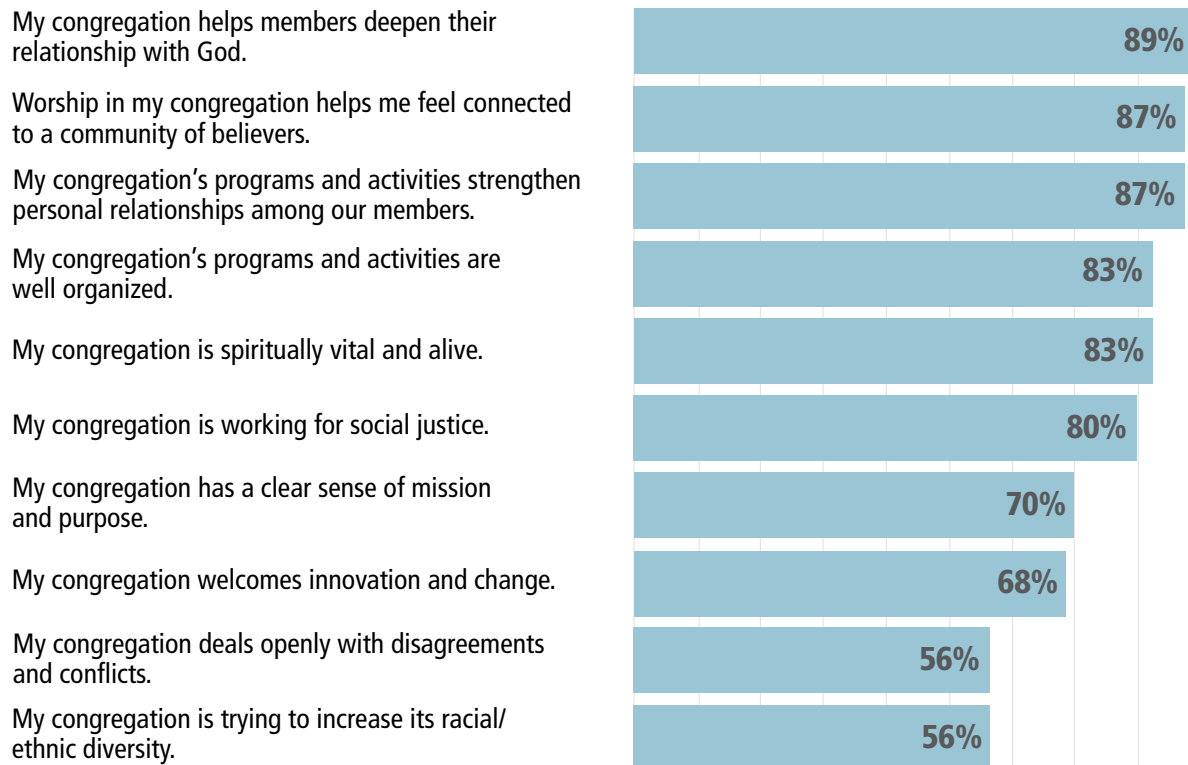
59%



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

## Perceptions of Congregation



In follow-up interviews, members emphasize the importance of resourcing from the denomination in 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.” — Monica

“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 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?’” — Marge

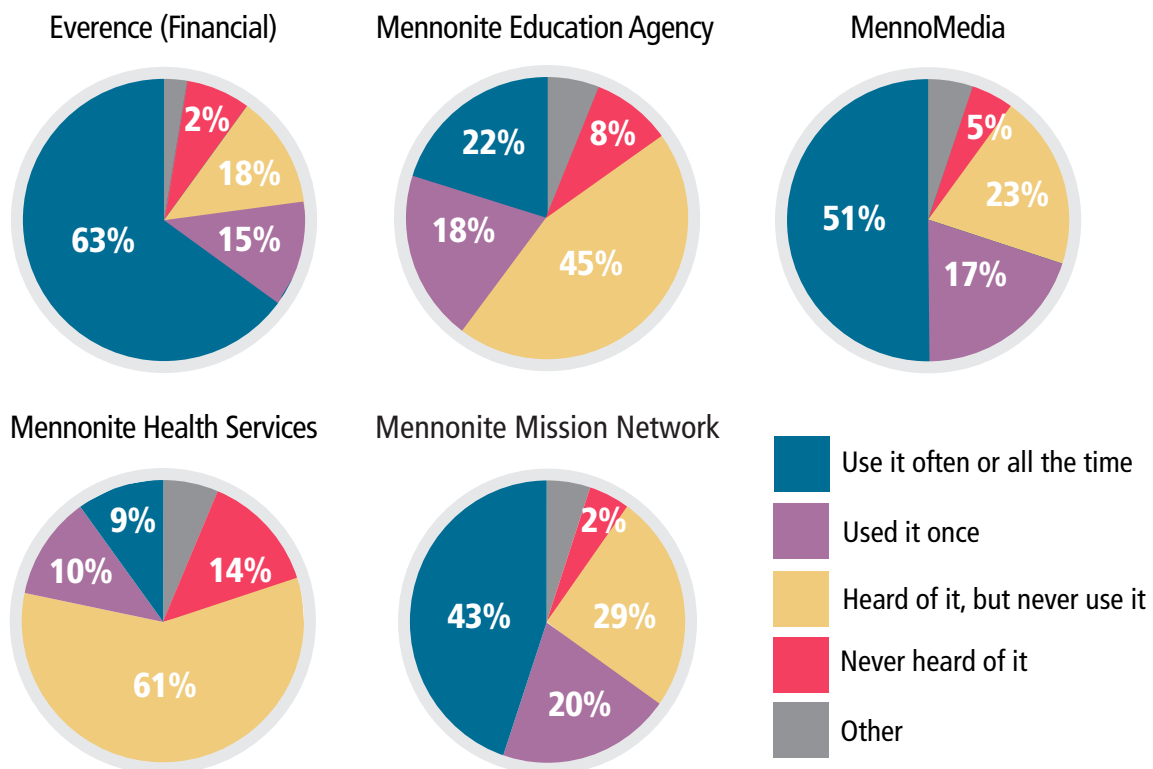
In terms of power and leadership, members indicate that shared responsibility is at the center of their local congregations. Most participants indicate that local congregations share power in decision-making (84%) and are open to new ideas, insights, and input from multiple sources, rather than having 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 welcome innovation and change (68%).

Notwithstanding the impact of COVID-19, the majority of members' involvement in local congregations has stayed the same (61%). Almost all 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 attended services weekly or more (90%); however, mid-pandemic this number decreased 10 percentage points with 80% of members attending virtual services once a week or more.

### At the denominational level

MC USA members are generally aware of services offered by the denomination, but their usage of these services varies. However, folks 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” by many MC USA members are Everence (63%), MennoMedia (51%), and Mennonite Mission Network (43%).

### Frequency of Services Used







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MC USA program agencies and other affiliated organizations are an important feature of the denomination that members find connection through. 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.

*“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*

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 are satisfied with a leader if they have had more encounters, or opportunities for encounters, with them.

Unsurprisingly, current MC USA members also have mixed levels of personal commitment to different organizational bodies within their 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%).

Just over one-third (37%) indicate that they don't get communications from the executive board, while 29% indicate that messages from the executive board are useful. Another 12% say communications from the board are effective, but the same percentage say they don't understand what the board is trying to do with communications. Also, 27% do not know how they feel about the communications from the executive board.

## **Recommendations and Considerations for Action**

MC USA ought to discern ways to model the embodiment of the Mennonite faith while guiding congregations toward MC USA's understanding of Anabaptism. MC USA should consider developing additional training for congregational leaders centered around DEI (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 responsibilities of the executive board and more effectiveness in their communications. Likewise, the denomination should continue its support of the agencies and organizations that MC USA is affiliated with.

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

### 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. About one-half (52%) of members see MC USA as being open to changes in values and mission, and 53% don't want MC USA to return to a more traditional or historical approach to church.

#### MC USA Values and Mission

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

53%

MC USA is open to changes in values and mission.

52%

MC USA can come together if it returns to a focus on Jesus.

51%

“Take the bold stances as our religious foremothers and forefathers have with, you know, abolition or civil rights or things where the church has been courageous to stand up and make having a faith mean something, so be forward-looking.” — Melanie

“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. 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 indicate that the denomination is not 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, the majority of participants (51%) believe that MC USA can come together if it returns to a focus on Jesus.

“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



“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 majority of MC USA members select politics (68%) and too many divisions overall (50%) as the reasons 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

Only one-tenth of current members indicate that mission fulfillment is related to either denominational support (9%) or congregational openness (10%).

“Almost everybody who I knew that 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 think the church needs to openly say, ‘Gay pastors are okay.’ And like, ‘Women in leadership are okay.’ All those things, and I feel like that would entice more of my peers to be involved in the church again.” — Penny

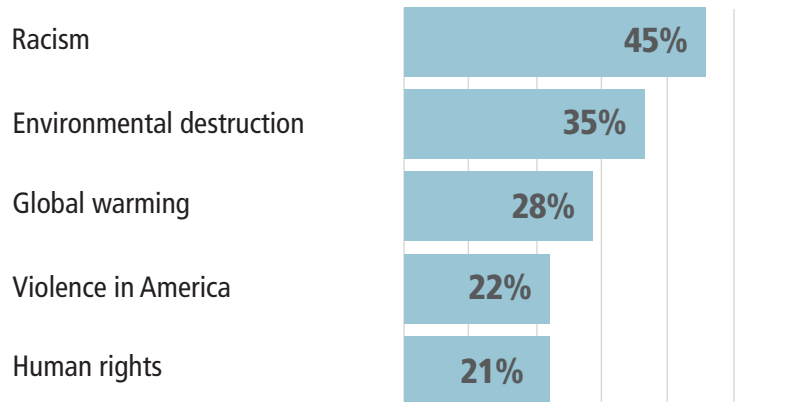
The essential activities that MC USA provides to its members continue to be working for peace and justice (68%) and sharing God’s love in word and deed (65%). However, since 2006, peace and justice have become the most important activity, with sharing God’s love coming in a close second (Kanagy, 2007).

Across the board, participants agree that outreach to those in need is essential (92%). 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.

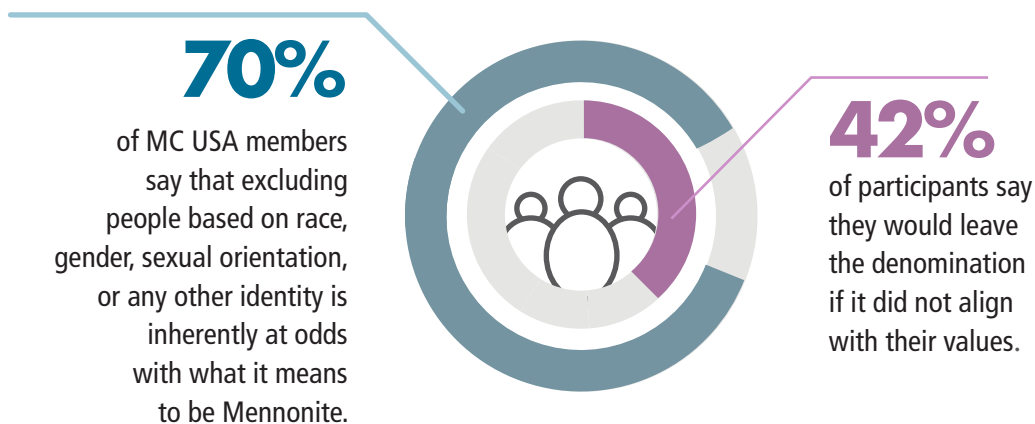
## Cultural Issues

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%).

### Issues of Most Concern in Society



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 MC USA members 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 generally 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 that MC USA leadership represent the denominational body. 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, but only 57% of members feel that MC USA ought to officiate weddings between LGBTQ individuals in the congregation. Follow-up interviews emphasize the importance of MC USA's movement toward an inclusive, diverse denomination and ways to get there.

**93% of participants agree that MC USA ought to be committed to anti-racist efforts.**

“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

“What I’ve noticed is they often have Black people, they often have members of the LGBT community as tokens 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.” — Isabella

Members may not be aware of a sexual misconduct policy (32%) because most members have not experienced members of their congregation violating their physical or social boundaries (89%). While 19% have experienced sexism from members of their congregation or ministry colleagues, 40% of members don’t know if there is even a system in place at their congregation or conference to address the misuse of power by ministry or congregation colleagues.

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).

“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

## Guidelines and Polity

In addition to social and spiritual culture, we explored dimensions of the structure of the denomination. During discovery calls, stakeholders asked to know more about how members experience membership guidelines and polity.

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

“I think it’s disingenuous to say that MC USA should just stay out of politics and that’s not what we’re doing. And I think it is a question of justice when the denomination has for so long held exclusionary and discriminatory stances towards 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



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“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

Over one-half of members (54%) agree that decisions about political visibility and stances should be made at the congregational/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.

“I hope that the denomination is more toward a congregational-based polity, with the conferences and denomination providing [a] sort of structure for that and resourcing and a way for us to gather through conferences and assemblies.” — Aimee

“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.” — Jake

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## Recommendations and Considerations for Action

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.

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## ***Data With Heart* means you get more than statistics: you'll know what to do next.**

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

[springtideresearch.org/services/custom-research](https://springtideresearch.org/services/custom-research)



***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