



How Mennonite Churches Engage with Creation Care

Tailoring Creation Care Plans for Different Congregations

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- Congregational concern for creation increases congregational action. Congregations that are most concerned are more likely to have pursued creation care actions.
- The language we use around caring for creation matters. Questions containing political language showed that theologically liberal churches were more environmentally active while questions with more neutral language scored more evenly across theological perspectives.
- Most churches do not have long-term sustainability plans. While many churches have taken creation care steps, few have developed intentional carbon reduction plans.

This project showed that increased concern for creation did correlate with increased action. Motivations for action were centered on ideas of stewardship and social awareness, whereas congregations that were less active did not see creation care fitting into their theological or social perspectives. Further investigation indicated that theologically liberal churches were more aware of their actions, but that theologically conservative churches also engaged in some actions consistent with creation care. These were framed in non-environmental ways, with language having a particularly large impact on how actions were viewed.

Across the spectrum, environmentally friendly actions were often motivated by financial savings. Actions often did not translate into other areas of church life, such as worship, and rarely led to more formal carbon reduction plans. All groups expressed a desire for more theological resources in creation care.

Summary

Although there is good information on national trends of individual concerns and actions towards environmental issues such as climate change, and CSCS surveys have characterized individual attitudes and actions of Anabaptists (see the CSCS white paper of spring 2020), there is less information on environmental attitudes and actions at a congregational level. This project surveyed 57 churches to assess creation care attitudes and actions in Mennonite churches.

Results of this survey point towards commonalities and differences in how churches engage creation care. Churches across the spectrum engage in some creation care actions and desire more resources to understand the issues. However, the level of actions and framing of those actions differs in churches, and coherent plans for engaging churches on creation care should recognize these differences. A set of creation care action plans was created which tailor church engagement to these different perspectives.

Introduction

How do congregations' attitudes and beliefs impact their creation care actions? We know that congregations care about creation, but we also know that creation care comes with a variety of challenges that impact the way they choose to care. We asked Mennonite and Mennonite affiliated congregations to help us gain a better understanding of their attitudes, beliefs, and actions around creation care and climate change through a short survey. The survey was conducted as a part of CSCS's 2019-20 Climate Futures Fellowship and was followed up by 30 minute voluntary interviews with 22 of the 57 participants.

Respondents

Church leadership of half Mennonite Church USA, all US Mennonite Brethren affiliated churches, and some Mennonite Church Canada congregations were invited to participate in the survey via email. 57 congregations responded to the survey. Of those 57 congregations, 43 were affiliated with Mennonite Church USA, 7 with Mennonite Brethren, and the remaining 7 were other Mennonite/Anabaptist denominations. In the charts below, congregations are identified based on the "6 Americas methodology" which segments responses according to six based categories. In this study, 20 congregations were in the Alarmed category, 17 in Concerned, 10 in Cautious, 2 in Disengaged, 4 in Doubtful, and 4 in Dismissive. All responses were

voluntary and no term or question was described beyond the survey.

1. The most concerned congregations are the most active.

Church leaders were asked to answer a series of questions about their congregation's current attitudes towards climate change and their levels of creation care engagement over time. Each congregation's attitudes towards climate change was rated using Global Warming's Six Americas' scale of Alarmed through Dismissive. Next, their level of engagement was determined by their answers to action-based questions. Actions were rated using Mennonite Creation Care Network's Green Congregation Scoresheet, with Green as the most active and Visioning the least. Figure 1 shows how congregational attitudes (alarmed to dismissive) differ with increasing levels of creation care action (bottom to top, visioning to green).

The chart shows a positive trend between a congregation's level of climate change concern and the level of action taken. Congregations that are most concerned about climate change are more likely to have pursued creation care actions.

In their interviews, congregations that exhibited the most action around creation care expressed that their motivations for action were based in Christian

stewardship and emphasis on social awareness. For example, one pastor said that their "congregation has a long history of being engaged in justice, peace, and creation concerns in its community." Another pastor from a rural community stated that their engagement stems from an "awareness of the importance of the land in relation to our food and in relation to our economic structures." Yet another pastor

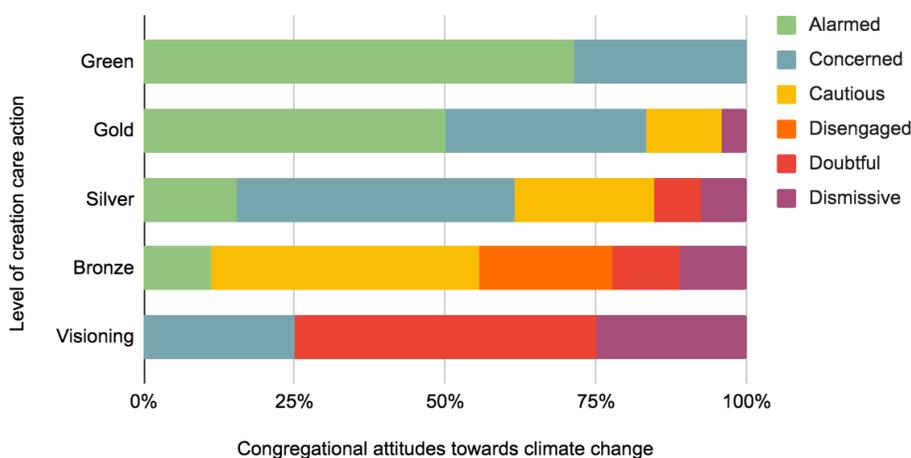


Figure 1. Congregational attitudes towards climate change per level of creation care action.

shared that their connection to the earth comes from a "creation spirituality and relationship with God." These churches were more likely to say that stewardship of the land, tradition and culture, and relationship with Christ are connected to their commitment to creation care than less concerned congregations.

"Creation care comes from our church's awareness of the importance of the land in relation to our food and in relation to our economic structures."

Congregations who were less concerned and less active in areas of creation care expressed that they do not see creation care fitting into their theological or social perspectives. They were more likely to view creation care as "getting too political" and "not a priority of our ministry." They instead talked about the futility of individual action or a need to build trust in leadership by proceeding with caution around politically charged topics.

2. Perceptions of actions are strongly associated with language used to describe the actions.

Participating churches exhibited their beliefs about the politically charged nature of environmentalism in their

answers to the survey questions. Both the theological perspective rating scale (from very liberal to very conservative) and the category terms were not defined beyond the survey, so survey participants responded based on their own interpretation of the question.

These questions were asked to better understand how a church's theological perspective impacts their relationship to environmental issues within their community. According to the survey, churches that self-identified as more theologically liberal were more likely to be aware of environmental impacts on their community, participate in environmental justice activities, and speak out when laws or systems permit damage to the earth.

However, during interviews with self-identifying theologically conservative congregations, it became clear that they were knowledgeable of environmental issues in their community and in some cases had taken actions to care for creation. They answered the survey questions with lower levels of action because their engagement was focused on ministering to their community. For them, caring for creation was a byproduct of other commitments.

The wording of the questions discouraged theologically conservative churches from associating their actions with environmental activism. One pastor rated their church as inactive in all three areas, but through conversation came to see their position on

peace and initiation of a community food pantry as possibly fitting into one or more of these categories.

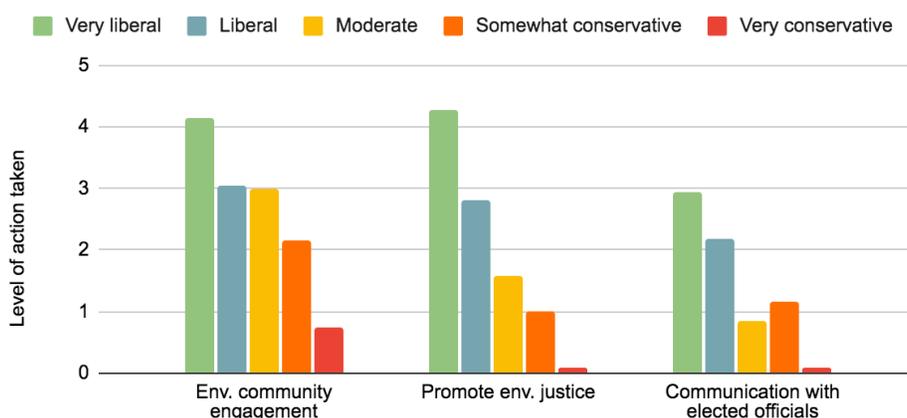


Figure 2. Average political engagement of churches by congregational theological perspective

3. Creation care actions generally have not been fully integrated in to church life or plans.

Questions with fewer political undertones scored much more evenly across participant’s theological perspectives. Questions regarding stewardship practice, creation care worship integration, and blessing individuals who have stewardship gifts scored higher across the spectrum of theological perspectives (Fig. 3) (Very Liberal through Somewhat Conservative scored in the 3-5 action range). During interviews, many church leaders expressed that “eco-friendly” alterations to church facilities were motivated by financial savings and, in the case of more liberal respondents, decreasing their energy footprint. Considering solar, updating old machinery, reconsidering landscaping, recycling and installing gardens and composting systems were financially beneficial for churches across the spectrum.

Interviews indicated that few congregations outside the Very Liberal and Liberal categories connected their stewardship practices beyond the church facilities to other aspects of church life. Very Conservative congregations rarely formally integrated creation care into worship practices.

While churches scored high on their environmentally friendly stewardship actions, most churches have not developed intentional carbon reduction plans (fig 4). Many churches have replaced old machinery, updated

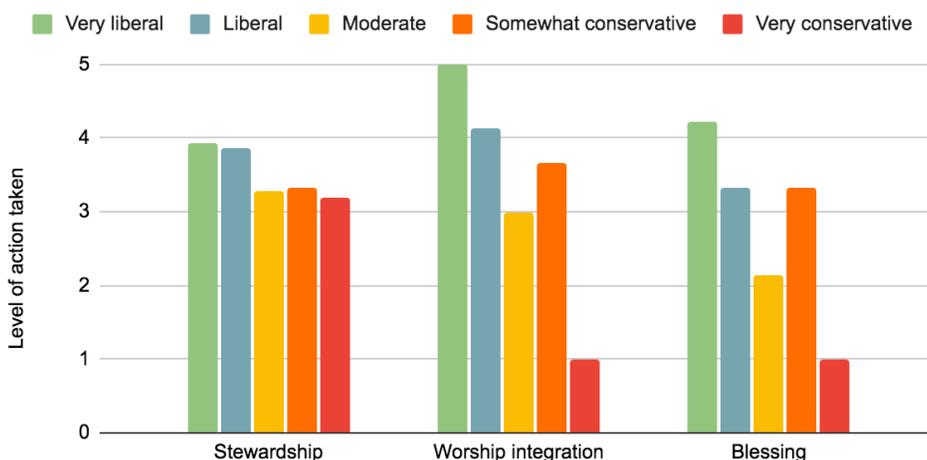


Figure 3. Actions taken integrating creation care into church life

AC and heating units, installed double paned windows, and reduced water consumption through landscaping, but when it comes to long term sustainability planning few steps are taken. During interviews, Alarmed churches had varying success designing and implementing ecological reduction plans. Churches who were beginning the process had accomplished much of the “low hanging fruit” projects and were unsure how to translate their work into a sustainable commitment.

When asked what kind of resources would be most helpful for developing a sustainable commitment to

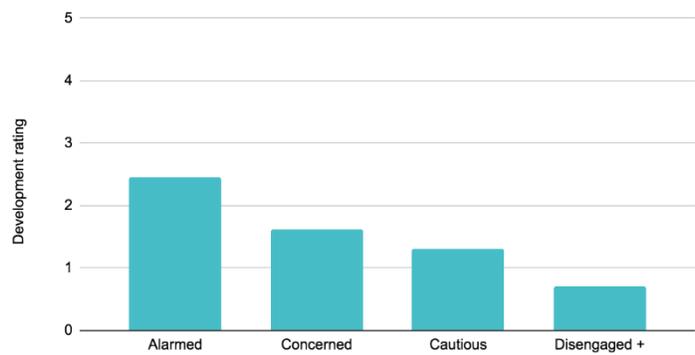


Figure 4. Success at developing a plan for ecological footprint reduction in church life.

creation care, all groups wanted resources from Mennonite or Christian organizations that spoke to the theological side of creation care responsibility. They also wanted general congregational tools and individual resources that lay people could use and understand. Alarmed groups wanted resources on

ways to engage broader environmental impacts and highlighted that fear tactics are ineffective for positive, continued action. All groups also expressed desire for small group resources and materials that foster joy and faith-based hope around creation care.

Conclusions

Congregations' attitudes and beliefs do impact their creation care actions. Congregations that are most concerned about climate change are more likely to have pursued creation care actions, but a church's perception of creation care is also influenced by the language used around it. Conversations that center around common theological values are more likely to invite future action while those that highlight political language do not.

These findings paired with congregational desires for resources and sustainability planning tools encouraged us to design 4 Creation Care Action Plans that meet churches at their individual levels of readiness and abilities. We believe that the many differing experiences, views, and beliefs about God's creation are important parts of caring for the world so we incorporated a variety of topics, exercises, and resources in each plan. If every church identified and applied their strengths for the good of all God's creation then together we could embody the multi-faceted nature of caring for the world as a body of Christ.



Creation Care Action Plans are available for download at <https://sustainableclimatesolutions.org/creation-care-action-plans/>