

HOW U.S. MENNONITE CHURCHES RELATE TO CLIMATE ADVOCACY:

A Study of Receptivity to and Practice of Political Advocacy for Climate Justice

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- While some respondents expressed a skepticism that advocacy is effective, the majority actually did not express skepticism that advocacy works.
- Of the levels of governmental advocacy, federal advocacy has the lowest perceived sense of efficacy.
- Certain forms of advocacy appeared to connect more with the survey respondents considering advocacy. The most frequently selected included letter writing campaigns, phone calls, and to some extent, advocacy outside of the political infrastructure, like vigils, demonstrations, and protests.
- Climate advocacy as a faith practice is in keeping with the theology of the majority of churches who responded.
- Practically, many churches aren't actively engaging in advocacy. These churches would benefit from concerted resources and direct support from Anabaptist institutions equipped to facilitate this work.

Summary

Mennonites and other Anabaptists have an often-complicated history with political involvement. As the Mennonite Church, particularly MCUSA, engages in work to address system injustice and the impacts of climate change on those most affected by injustices, many churches are looking for ways to engage with this topic through daily, personal practices. One of these actions is political advocacy for climate justice. Some have engaged heavily with this work, but many have not.

This survey sought to understand how churches are engaging with the issue of political advocacy for climate justice. While some churches are interested in this work, there remains significant work to be done in educating and equipping churches to advocate. Only 20% of churches said that they were actively involved in political advocacy as a part of their work. A further breakdown of the types of advocacy that churches are doing reveals that churches are drawn to certain types of advocacy over others, especially letter writing and making phone calls. The data also indicated an affinity for extra-political advocacy such as vigils and protests.

However, some of these survey results reveal a skepticism that advocacy is an effective outlet for the church's mission. While many churches acknowledge that advocacy may have a place in their theology, many are unsure about its real-world significance. Further research and outreach is needed to identify ways to overcome that hesitancy and invite churches to engage further in the work of federal advocacy, especially.

Introduction

We entered this survey suspecting that many churches had not advocated for climate justice before, either because they did not believe it fit with their church's theology, or because they hadn't considered it as a means of faithful action. However, we wanted to gain a broader picture of how the Mennonite church is thinking about and relating to climate advocacy. We attempted to investigate how the Mennonite church's thinking on climate advocacy is changing, both as a facet of its church mission, and as an effective way of bringing about change.

Respondents and Methodology

A total of 88 congregations are represented in this survey, although not every respondent answers every survey question. Although church denomination was not information requested from respondents to complete the survey, the majority provided a church affiliation with their answers. Most of these churches were affiliated with Mennonite Church USA, although a few were Mennonite Brethren and other Anabaptist-affiliated denominations.

The respondents were largely pastors or lay leaders of green teams or creation care committees. In some situations, multiple

respondents from the same church completed the survey. In this case, we needed to select only one response to reflect the church's perspective. We selected first the responses of creation care/green team leaders to represent the church, rationalizing that they were most likely to have a strong sense of their church's climate-related work. When a lay creation care leader's response was absent, we selected the responses of pastors. When a pastor's response was absent, we selected the response of another lay leader.

Finally, it is important to note the ways in which this survey holds skewed results in terms of race and ethnicity. The respondents were largely white (of the 88, 74 were white). Using racial and ethnic identifiers used by other major surveys, 6 churches were Hispanic or Latinx; 4 were Black or African American; 2 were American Indian or Alaska Native; 1 was Asian. Because we are unaware of current racial and ethnic demographics within the Mennonite church, it's difficult to know just how biased the results are in favor of white Mennonite churches. However, given the low numbers of churches of color, we can be confident that they are underrepresented in this survey. The ways that information is gathered, and the ways in which much survey methodology perpetuates systemic injustice are issues that we must interrogate moving forward.

Finding #1: Churches engage with advocacy less than other creation care activities.

As "creation care" has become a value promoted within the Mennonite church, many churches have begun to investigate the potential for advocacy as a form of climate action. However, compared to many other identified forms of climate action, or creation care, advocacy lags significantly. (Fig 1)

"On which types of creation care work does your church spend the most time?"

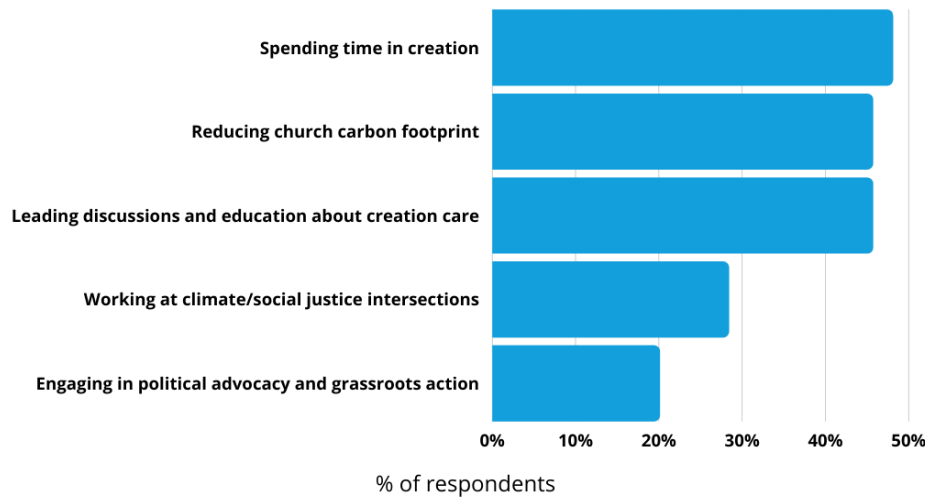


Fig. 1. Percentage of respondents engaging in various types of church creation care work

From the analysis of the data from this survey, we see that more individual actions, like reducing carbon footprints, and actions focused on discussion and education hold high priority. The

action most commonly identified is simply, "spending time in creation," which would presumably include actions like gardening, hiking, camping, etc. It appears that this kind of action

undergirds many Mennonites' and other Anabaptists' approach to climate work and creation care.

"What advocacy efforts have your church organized in the past?"

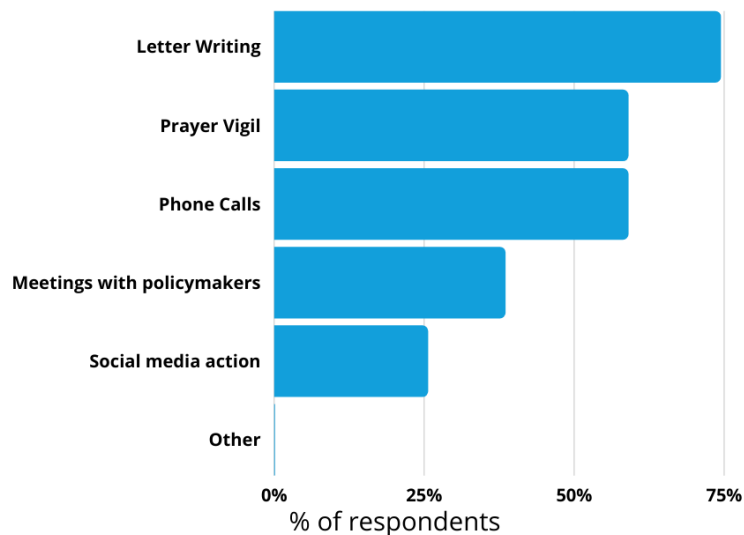


Fig. 2. Churches' history of types of advocacy, if they engaged in advocacy in the past.

Of the churches that have incorporated any type of advocacy into their church work, certain types of advocacy stand out. A minority of respondents (around 35%) have a history of scheduling and attending meetings with policymakers (Fig. 2), the kind of work that many organizations like Mennonite Central Committee are available to facilitate. The types of advocacy that many respondents had engaged in do not necessarily align with those forms of advocacy that congressional staff have identified as having the most

influence, according to research from the Congressional Management Foundation.

Congressional staffers identify in-person visits from constituents as the most likely to sway the Member/Senator's opinion, if they have not reached a firm decision on an issue. Efforts like writing letters and making phone calls (to a lesser extent) had broader popularity among the respondents but were not identified as the most effective by congressional staffers. The reality outlined in the two former graphs juxtaposes sharply with the data that appears from a survey question that asked respondents, "How receptive would your congregation be to increased interaction with your elected officials?"

This graph (Fig. 3) suggests that many churches are, at least, open to conversations about incorporating political advocacy into their church work. Around 50% were at least "somewhat receptive" and 14.1% were "receptive" to conversations about advocacy. While there may be residual skepticism, churches are also open to conversations about climate advocacy. What are the barriers, then, that prohibit them from engaging in advocacy? This will be discussed further in Finding #4.

This data challenges the oft-repeated notion of Anabaptists as people who are reticent to engage in politics or political advocacy.

Church receptivity to engagement with elected officials

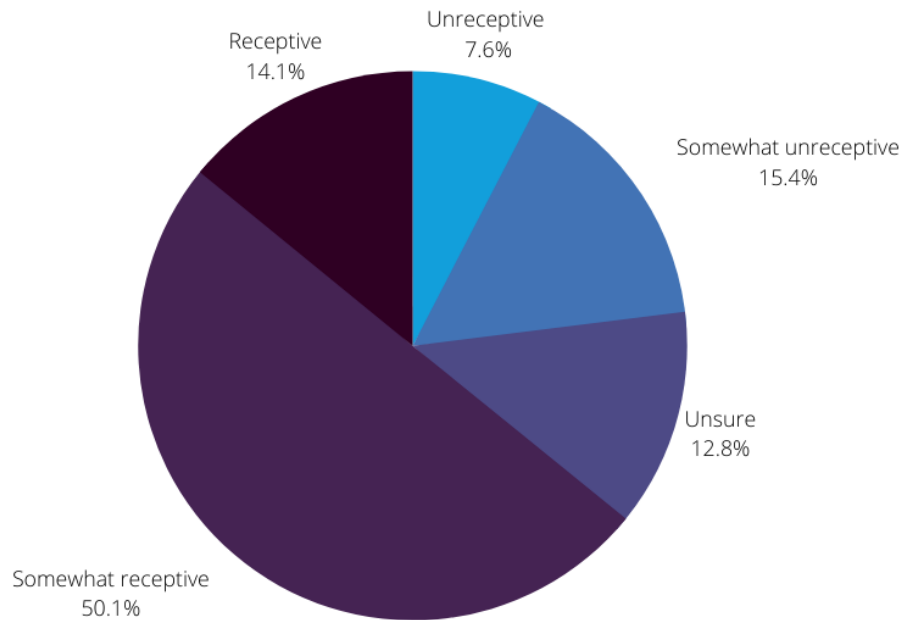


Fig. 3. Church receptivity to engagement with elected officials.

Finding #2: The sense of advocacy effectiveness varies depending on the level of government

A breakdown of perceived effectiveness is crucial to understanding in more depth how churches feel about advocacy – ultimately leading to the question of why so few churches are actively engaged in climate advocacy as a part of their creation care work. A series of three survey questions asked respondents to describe their level of agreement with three sentences: "Engaging with my national (federal) officials is an effective way to create change;"

This data reveals that there is a greater level of skepticism that advocacy to federal officials really works (Fig. 4). The majority of churches still "strongly agreed" that engaging with federal officials was an effective way to create change. However, the percentage of churches who either

didn't have a stance or disagreed to some extent was significantly higher than in either the local government or state government response breakdown. The largest percentage of respondents (43%) "strongly agreed" that interaction with local government officials was effective.

The overall trends among these three graphs indicate that confidence that advocacy is effective drops as the level of government increases. However, confidence that advocacy works overall is relatively high, even at the federal level. For advocacy organizers, it may be easier in some instances to engage hopeful advocates in work at their local and state levels first. However, for future engagement with prospective advocates, it will be important to challenge and investigate the reasons for this perception that federal advocacy is less effective.

Finding #3: Faith is a motivating force is approaching climate advocacy.

How, then, does a faith perspective motivate how churches do and do not engage with the work of climate advocacy? Fig 5 illustrates that there is a high percentage of respondents who believe that engaging with policymakers and policies is a part of their calling as Christians. This data challenges the oft-repeated notion of Anabaptists as people who are reticent to engage in politics or political advocacy. While these survey responses are undoubtedly skewed towards those who were willing to respond to a survey on the subject of climate advocacy, it indicates that an ethic that includes political advocacy is present in some facets of the Mennonite church.

"[X]-level advocacy is an effective way to create change."

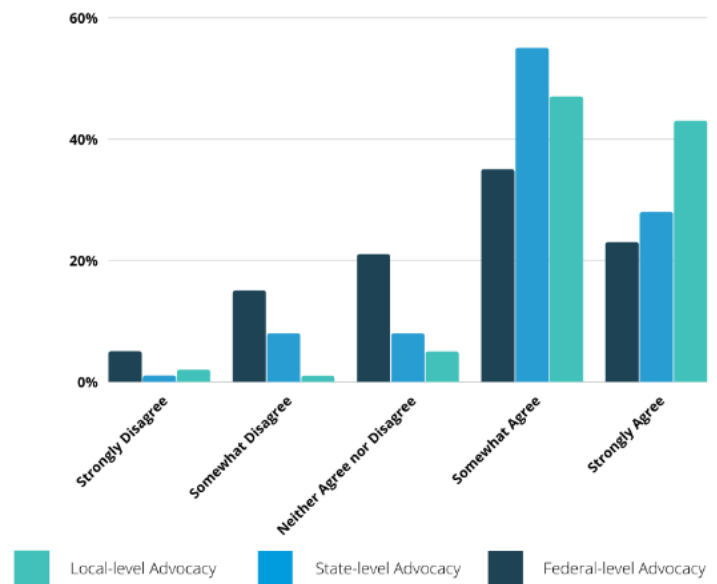


Fig. 4. Perceived effectiveness of advocacy to elected officials in each level of government.

"Engaging with policy makers and policies is a part of my calling as a Christian."

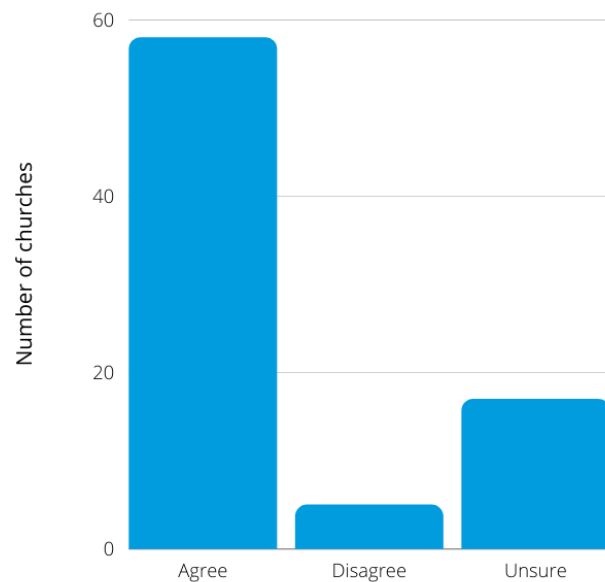


Fig. 5 Churches' perception of political advocacy as a part of Christian calling.

This sense that faith is a motivating reason for advocating – and that faithful advocacy is a critical part of the work of advocating – is so significant because it suggests that advocates from churches

could use a unique, ethical argument in interactions with policymakers. Unlike many other advocates, people of faith are able to carry a unique moral case for climate action to those who make decisions. This data affirms the notion that many churches have the faith context necessary to engage in dialogue with policymakers.

Finding #4: Investigating the current barriers to advocacy is necessary to equip churches to advocate more in the future.

The data thus far paints a picture that suggests that many churches who are not currently engaged in advocacy do feel an ethical obligation based on their faith to engage in advocacy. If most respondents believe that political advocacy is a part of faithful action, then what is keeping those same advocates from actually advocating with their churches?

In an attempt to understand why churches aren't currently more engaged in advocacy, we asked respondents about the main barriers that prevent them from advocating. Among the churches who were "somewhat receptive" to "unreceptive" to advocacy (Fig. 3) the sense that advocacy is ineffective was not a primary reason that respondents identified for choosing not to advocate. Instead, two major themes emerged: a lack of interest and a

lack of education/unfamiliarity with advocacy (Fig. 6). The respondents who identified an unfamiliarity with advocacy should be given special consideration. From an advocacy mobilization perspective, these respondents are easy to target and equip to engage in advocacy.

Future outreach should engage with pastors and other faith leaders to interrogate how to make stronger connections between advocacy and faith practices, with an emphasis on the ways in which advocacy is not too political for the work of the church.

With regards to the large percentage of responses that identified "not enough people are interested" as a reason that they wouldn't be able to advocate: the context in which respondents were encountering this survey is important to consider. This survey was disseminated in the fall of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Anecdotally, in interactions with pastors and other

"What are the most significant barriers to your church engaging in advocacy?"

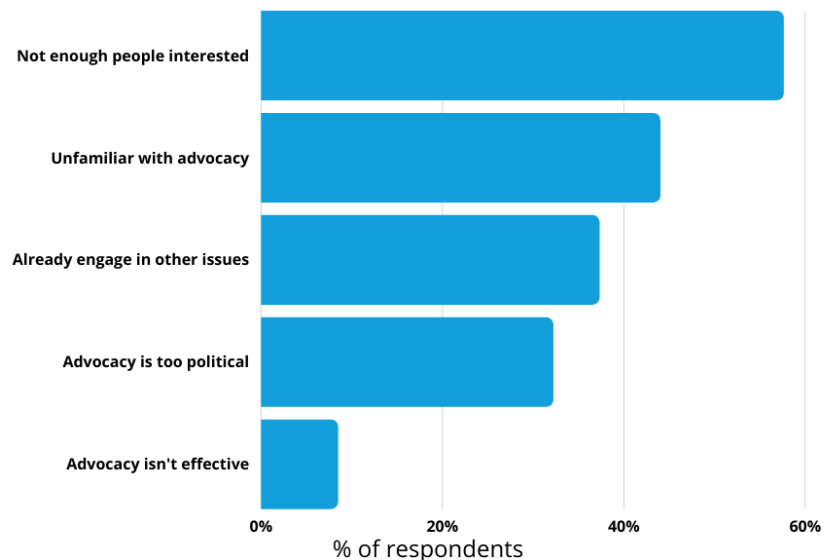


Fig. 6. Barriers to church advocacy.

church leaders, we discovered that many churches were experiencing a significant lack of energy (i.e., “not enough people are interested” in this survey). In a setting in which many respondents hadn’t been together in person with many of their fellow congregants, for many months at that time, it isn’t surprising to see that such a large quantity of respondents were simply unable to muster much engagement in a new church effort such as advocacy.

Looking to the future, we hoped to ascertain which types of advocacy those churches who were interested might hope to engage in, but also to address the barriers which keep many churches from advocating. This response, among others, facilitated the creation of a series of climate advocacy resources, published on the CSCS website. It also aided subsequent outreach to churches who had expressed interest in climate advocacy.

Fig. 7 indicates that the types of advocacy that churches are likely to engage in, and the types that congregations have historically engaged in do not differ significantly (see Fig. 3.). The high interest in engaging with vigils and protests is notable. For churches who are just starting out in advocacy, targeting actions like letter writing campaigns may be a helpful first step, and one that could have significant interest among many church members. However, the relatively low percentage of respondents who identified that they would be likely to attend a meeting with a policymaker identifies an area of growth for many advocacy organizations like Mennonite Central Committee’s advocacy offices. Educating congregations about why meetings are a critical part of advocacy is work that has been initiated in this year’s fellowship, but it should be a continued area of focus for CSCS and other faith organizations.

"In which types of advocacy would your congregation be likely to engage?"

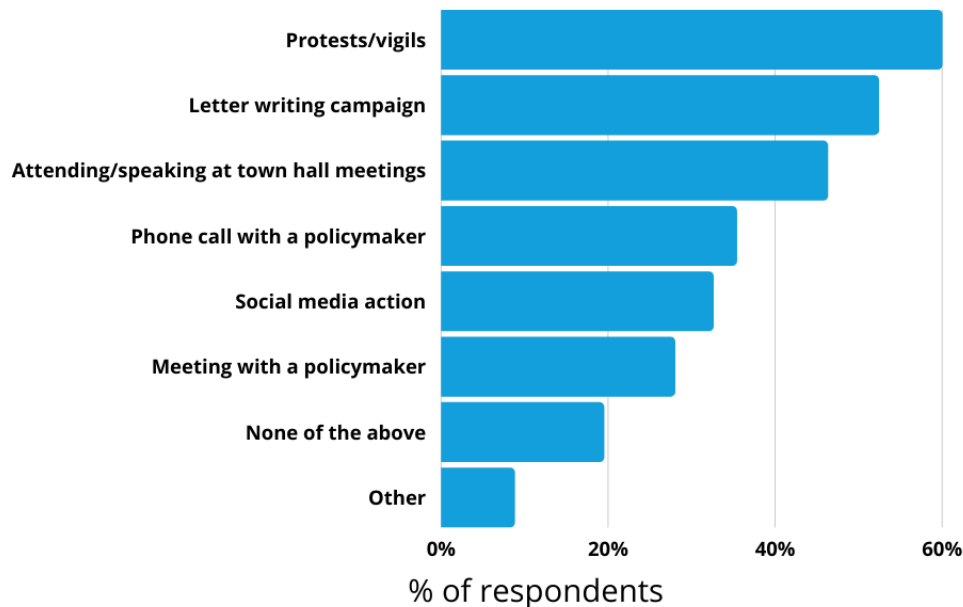


Fig. 7. Types of advocacy congregations may be interested in engaging in the future.

Concluding Recommendations

Some clear trends emerge as we analyze the data depicting churches' relationships with advocacy for climate justice. The first trend is a strong sense on the part of these respondents that advocacy is a part of a faith calling. An ethic like this backing advocacy efforts means that many churches are already primed to begin advocating.

What should those interested in education and organizing climate advocacy do next? Because many of these churches have already made the connections between their theology and advocacy, the greatest need for those hoping to engage their communities and churches in advocacy is good tools and resources to equip churches to begin advocating for climate justice. We hope that our new climate advocacy resources will aid churches who identified this need in their responses.

For the respondents who said that their churches believe that advocacy is too political, or that they would not be likely to engage in advocacy, it may be useful for future efforts to go towards ensuring the stronger connections between Anabaptist theology and climate advocacy happen. While this approach was outside the confines of the CSCS fellowship this year, it is hoped that future work will continue to interrogate these trends within the Anabaptist faith, equipping our churches to be hubs of advocacy and engagement with those who make decisions on our behalf.

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