



Exploring Commonalities – and Gaps – Between Preachers and Congregants on Creation-care Messaging and Ministries

Results of intake surveys from EcoPreacher Cohort Members and
Congregational Leaders: 2022

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REPORT | NOVEMBER 17, 2022



How Religion Intersects With Americans' Views on the Environment

Responsibility for the Earth is part of many U.S. Christians' beliefs, but so is skepticism about climate change

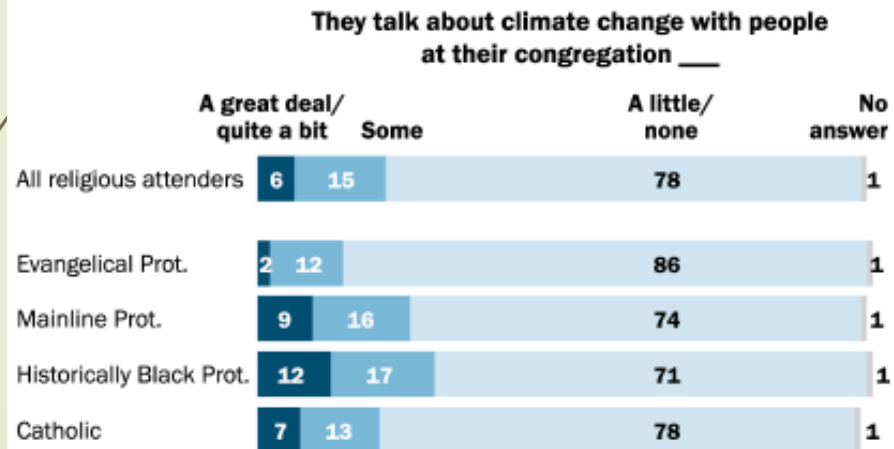
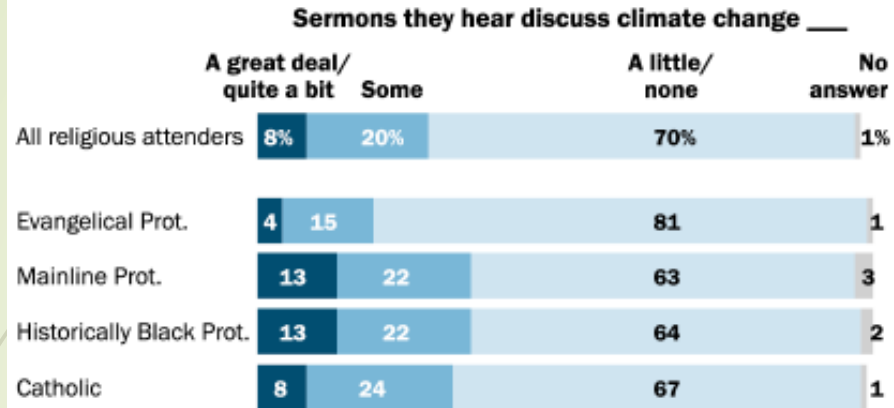
BY BECKA A. ALPER



- **Highly religious Americans overwhelmingly (92%) say God gave humans a duty to protect and care for the Earth.**
 - **BUT only 42% see CLIMATE CHANGE as a very serious problem.**
- **Only 8% of Americans are both highly religious and concerned about climate change**
- **Religiously affiliated Americans are *less likely* to be involved in activities to address climate change than their non-religious counterparts.**

Climate change gets relatively little attention in U.S. religious congregations

Among U.S. adults who attend religious services at least once or twice a month, % who say ...



Note: These questions were only asked of respondents who indicated in a previous survey that they attend religious services at least once or twice a month; these respondents are categorized as "religious attenders." The survey does not include enough members of other religious groups (or religious "nones") who attend services at least monthly to be able to report on their answers to these questions.

Source: Survey conducted April 11-17, 2022, among U.S. adults.

"How Religion Intersects With Americans' Views on the Environment"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Majority of congregants (70%) say they're not hearing about climate change in sermons

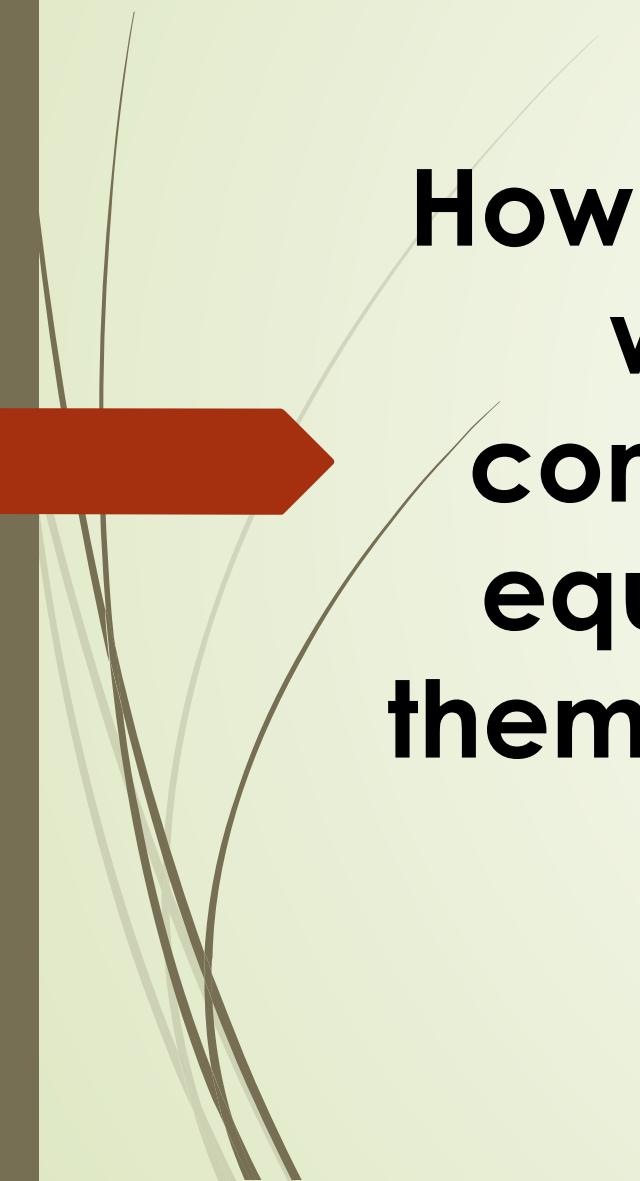
* Only 63% of mainline Protestants

➤ Only 21% say they're talking about climate change with people in their congregation.

AND YET:

In my 2023 survey, “Ministry, Preaching and Social Issues,” 74% of respondents (n=532 out of 723) said they preached a sermon in 2022 addressing climate change, caring for enviro, or related issue

So, there must be some kind of disconnect.



How can we bridge the gap between what clergy preach and what congregants hear in order to better equip, empower, and accompany them for addressing the climate crisis?



EcoPreacher Cohort

2022 Intake Survey Results

Rev. Dr. Leah D. Schade

Respondent Demographics

Number of Respondents

94

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

US – 94%

Other:
Canada
Ukraine
UK
Congo

STATES REPRESENTED

30

AGES

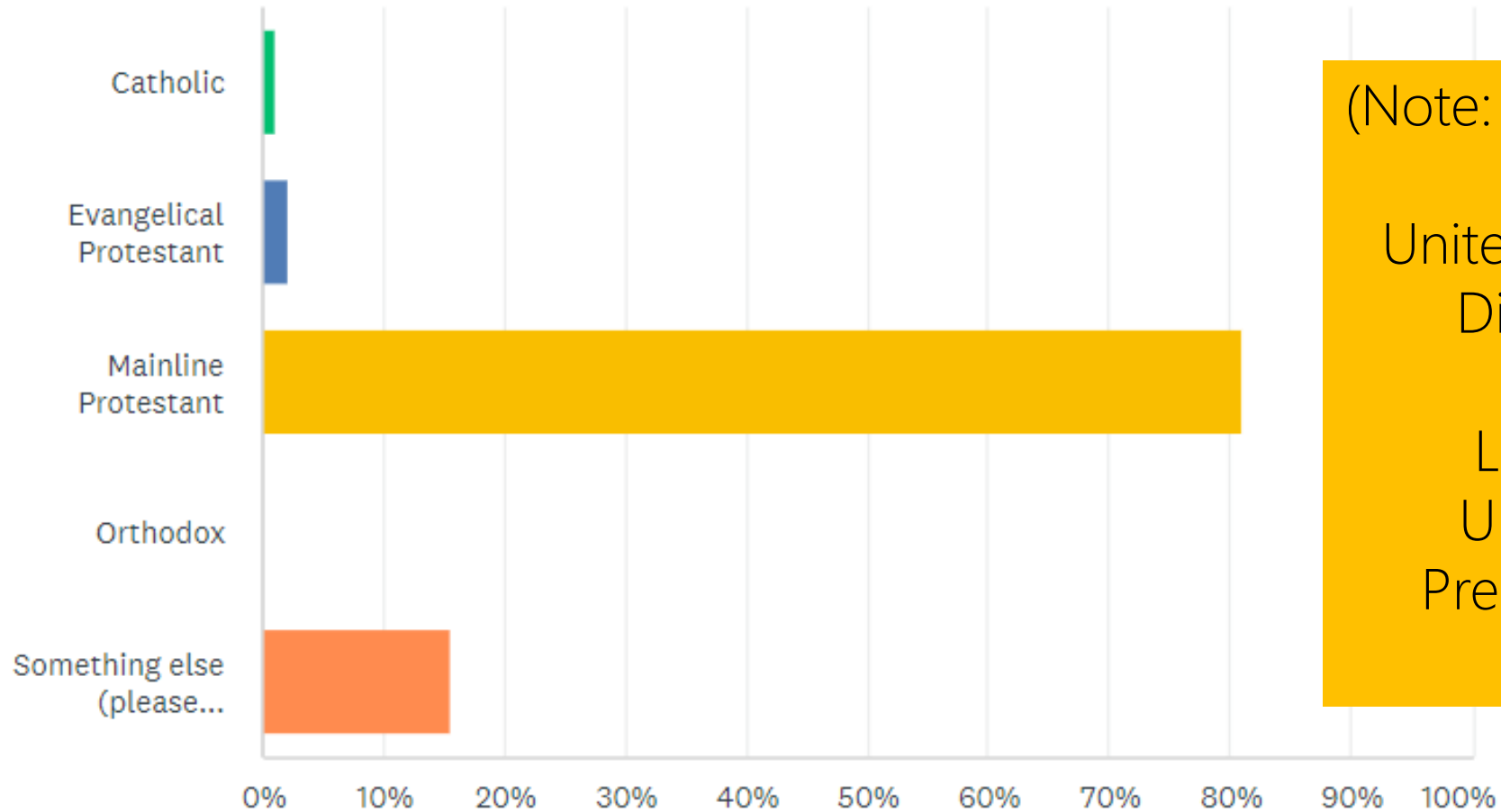
OLDEST – 74

YOUNGEST – 23

RELIGIONS REPRESENTED

Christian – 91%
Unitarian Universalist – 3%
Unaffiliated – 3%
Buddhist – 2%

Branches of Christianity represented



(Note: numbers are approximate)

United Church of Christ – 27%

Disciples of Christ – 19%

Episcopal – 17%

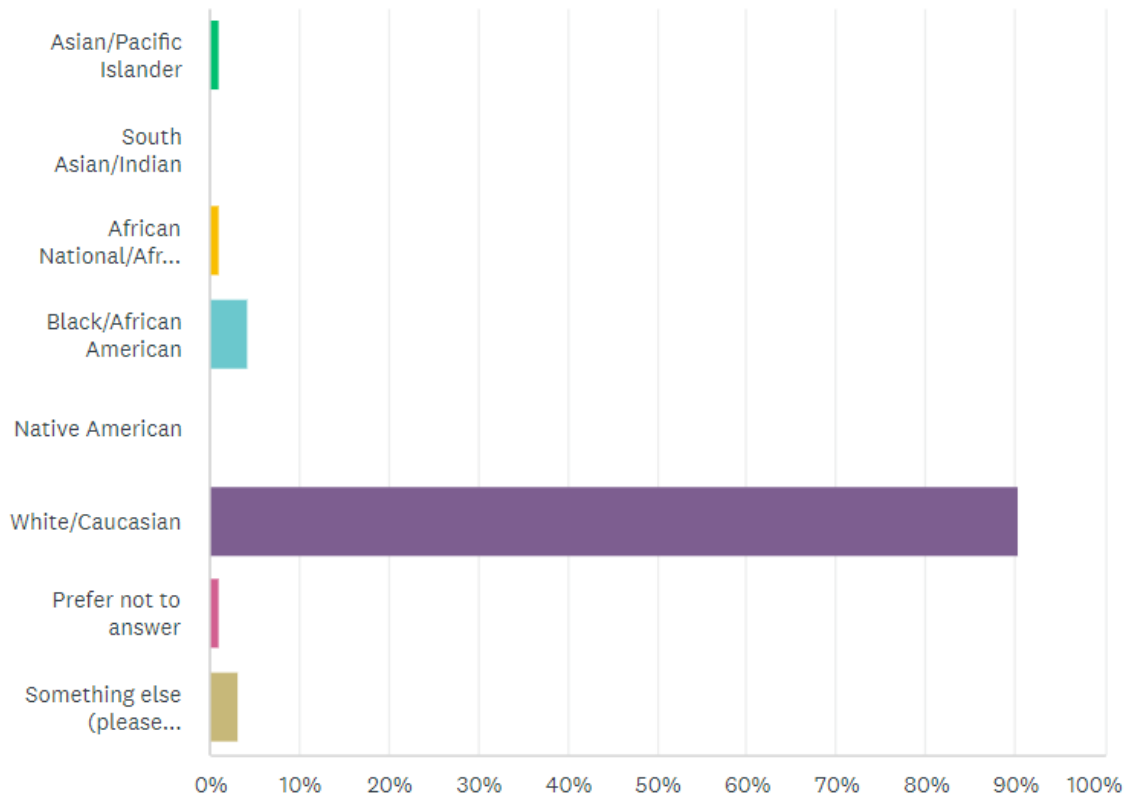
Lutheran (ELCA) – 13%

United Methodist – 10%

Presbyterian (PCUSA) – 7%

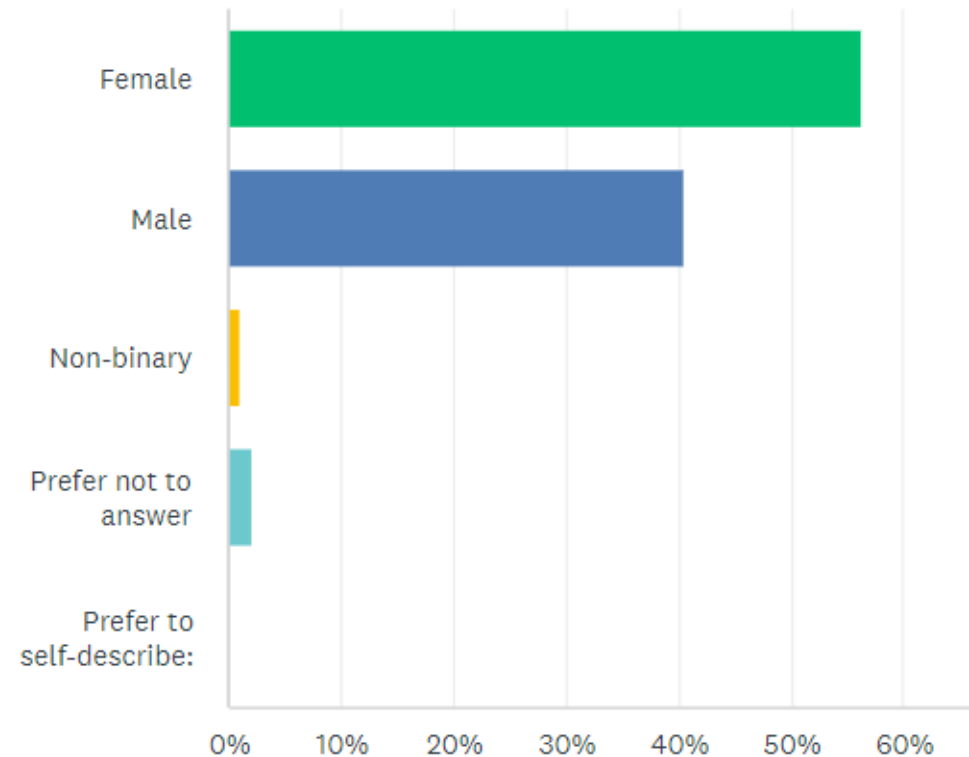
Other – 16%

RACE AND ETHNICITY

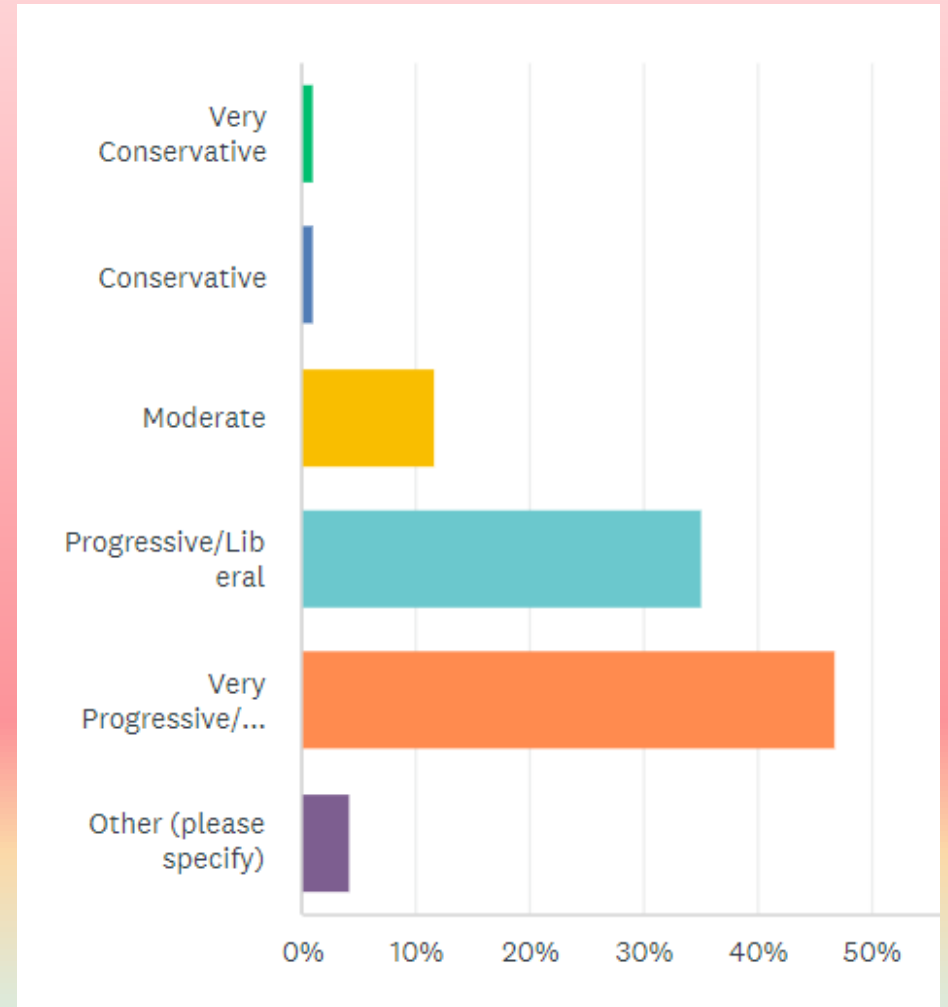
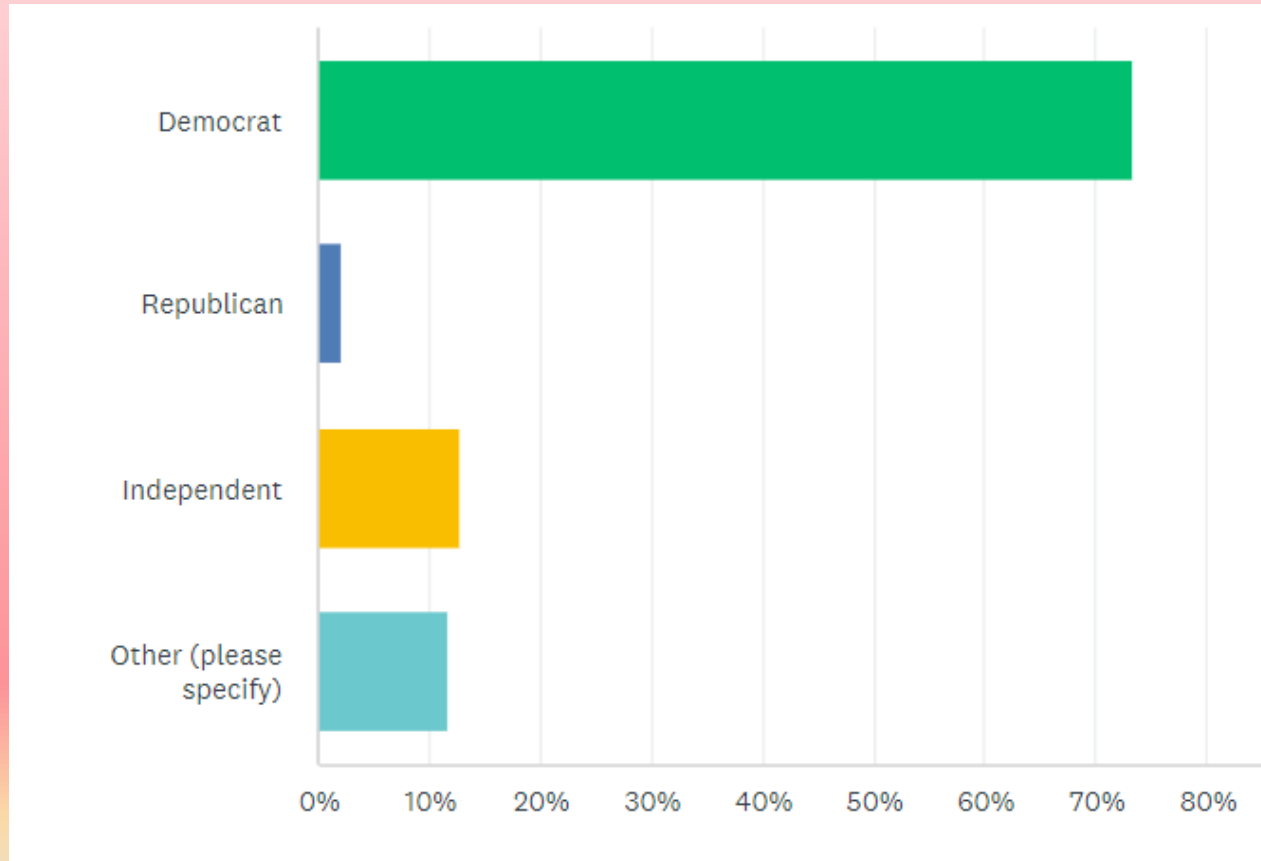


2 identified as Hispanic

Gender



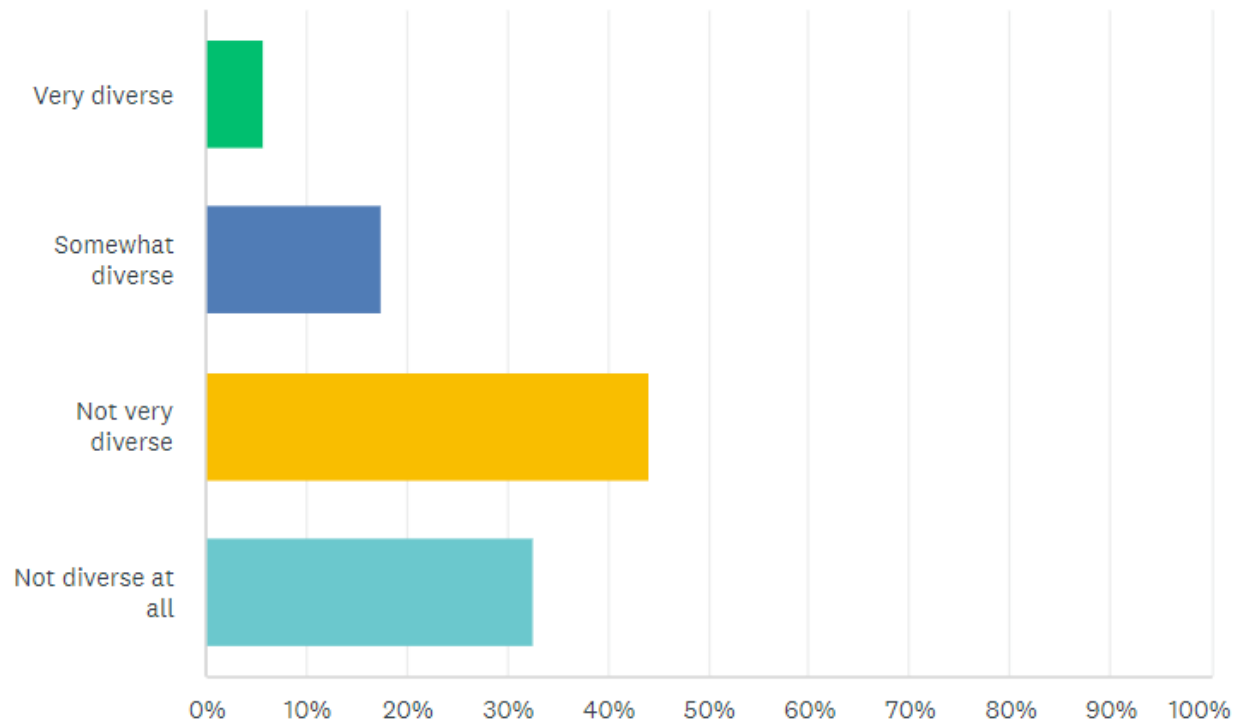
Politics



Congregational Profiles

How racially or ethnically diverse is the congregation?

Answered: 86 Skipped: 8

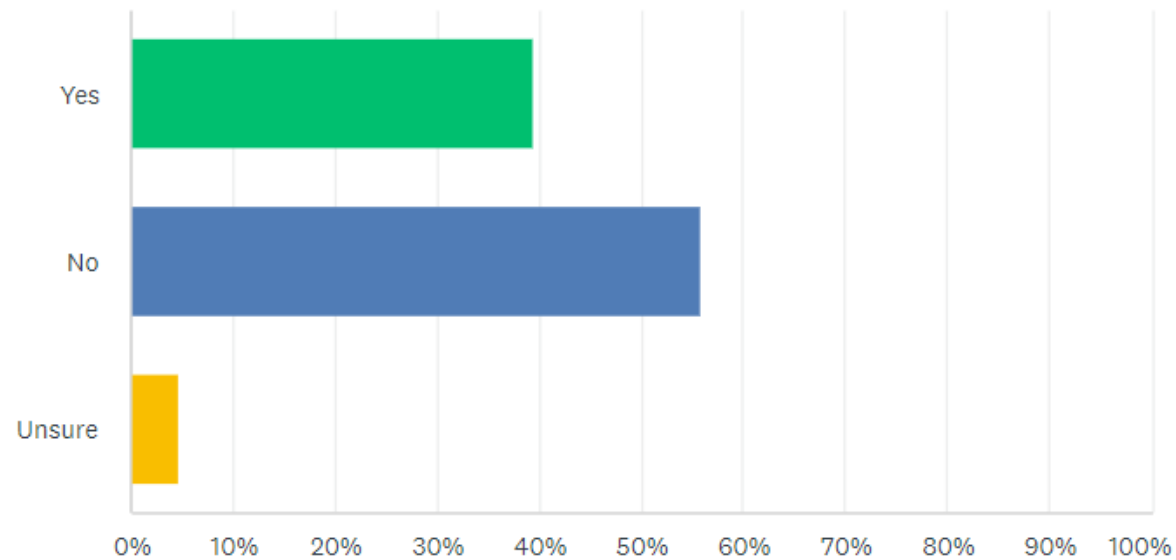


76% of respondents indicated that most of their congregants were white.

Congregational Profiles

Does your congregation have an “official” ecology or Creation-care ministry (ie, a committee, task force, etc.)?

Answered: 86 Skipped: 8



Congregational Profiles

93% of respondents said their congregation took part in some kind of Creation-centered activity in the last two years.

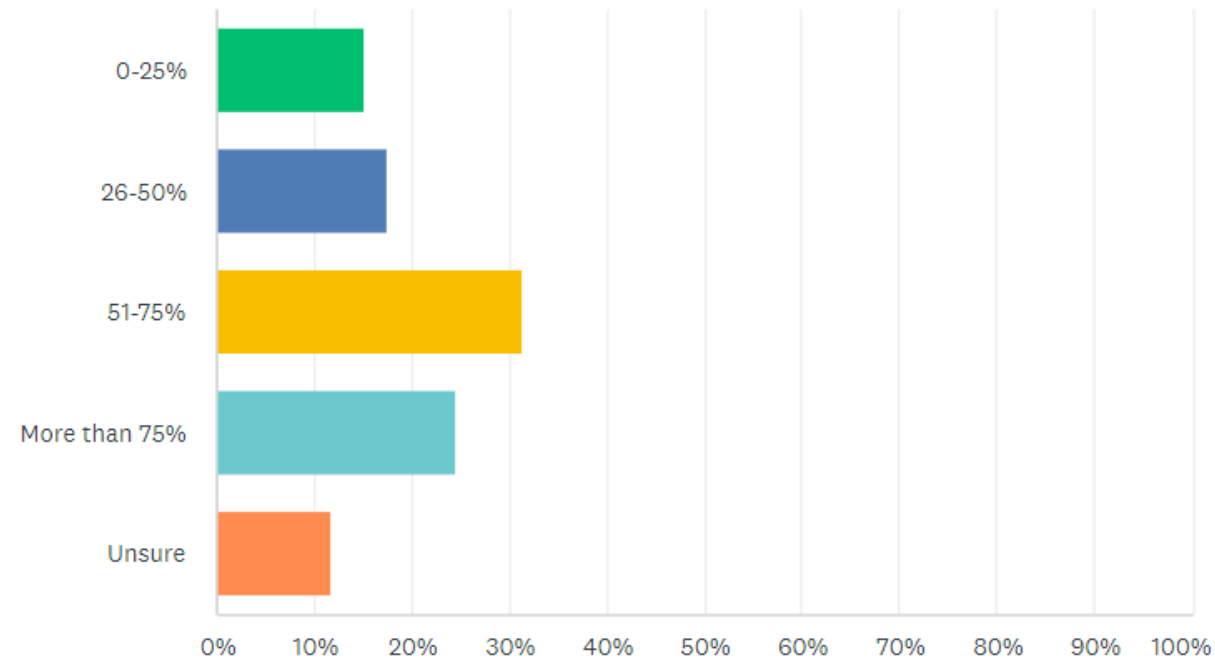
To what degree are congregations engaged in climate-related or ecological concerns at this time?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ “Tilling the ground” - no engagement yet	16% 14
▼ “Planting seeds” - just getting started with educating and raising awareness	26% 22
▼ “Sprouting” - at least one effort or event within the congregation	37% 32
▼ “Blooming” - ongoing and significant engagement in the congregation and community	17% 15
▼ “Fruiting” - we’re teaching other congregations how to do this work	3% 3
TOTAL	86

Congregational Profiles

In your estimation, what percentage of the congregation is supportive of your house of worship being involved in environmental/climate advocacy or activism?

Answered: 86 Skipped: 8



Barriers respondents experience when preaching on environmental issues

	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
▼ People resisting because they think it's "too political"	1.64
▼ Lack of interest among the congregation	1.28
▼ Congregation not seeing the connection between faith and Creation	1.06
▼ Don't know where to start or lack of resources	0.62
▼ Lack of support from ministry colleagues	0.48
▼ Lack of support from denomination	0.26

Weighted scale:

Major barrier = 3

Moderate barrier = 2

Minor barrier = 1

Not a barrier = 0



EcoPreacher Congregation Survey

2022 Results

Rev. Dr. Leah D. Schade

Respondent Demographics



Number of Respondents

172

Congregations represented

30

STATES REPRESENTED

16

AGES

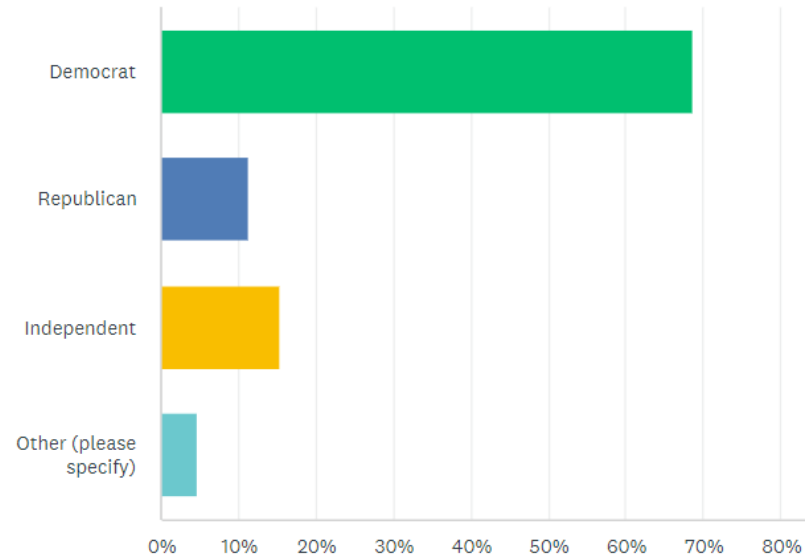
OLDEST – 83

YOUNGEST – 18

Politics

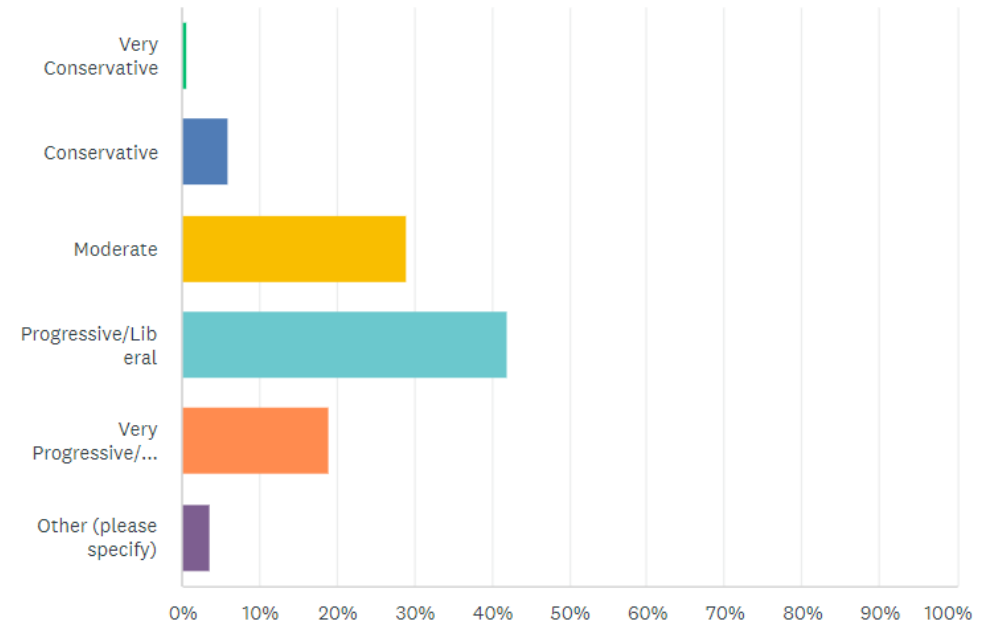
What political party do you identify with the most?

Answered: 169 Skipped: 3



How would you describe your views on political and social issues?

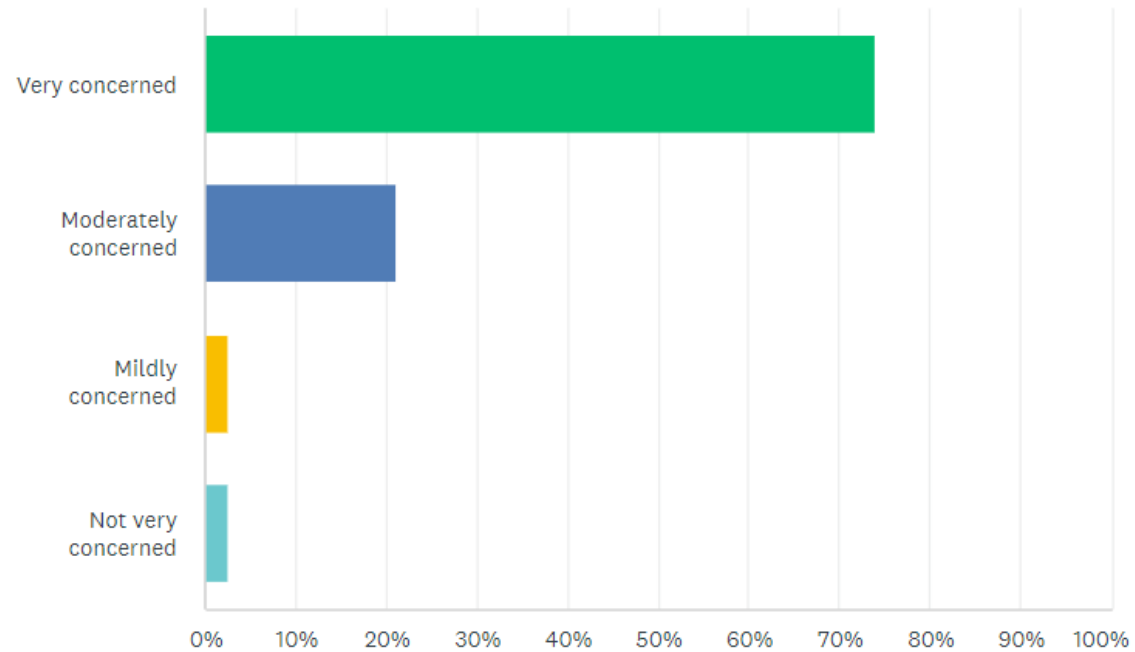
Answered: 169 Skipped: 3



Concern about Environment

How concerned are you about our planet and the environment and/or climate change?

Answered: 157 Skipped: 15



74% are “very concerned” about the environment

Yet half of them (49%) think that the majority of their congregation **would not** be supportive of the church being involved in environmental or climate advocacy. (Compared with Cohort participants estimates of 30%)

Importance of Creation Care

85% want to see their congregation become more involved with caring for the environment.

89% said that connecting their faith and their love of nature is important to them.

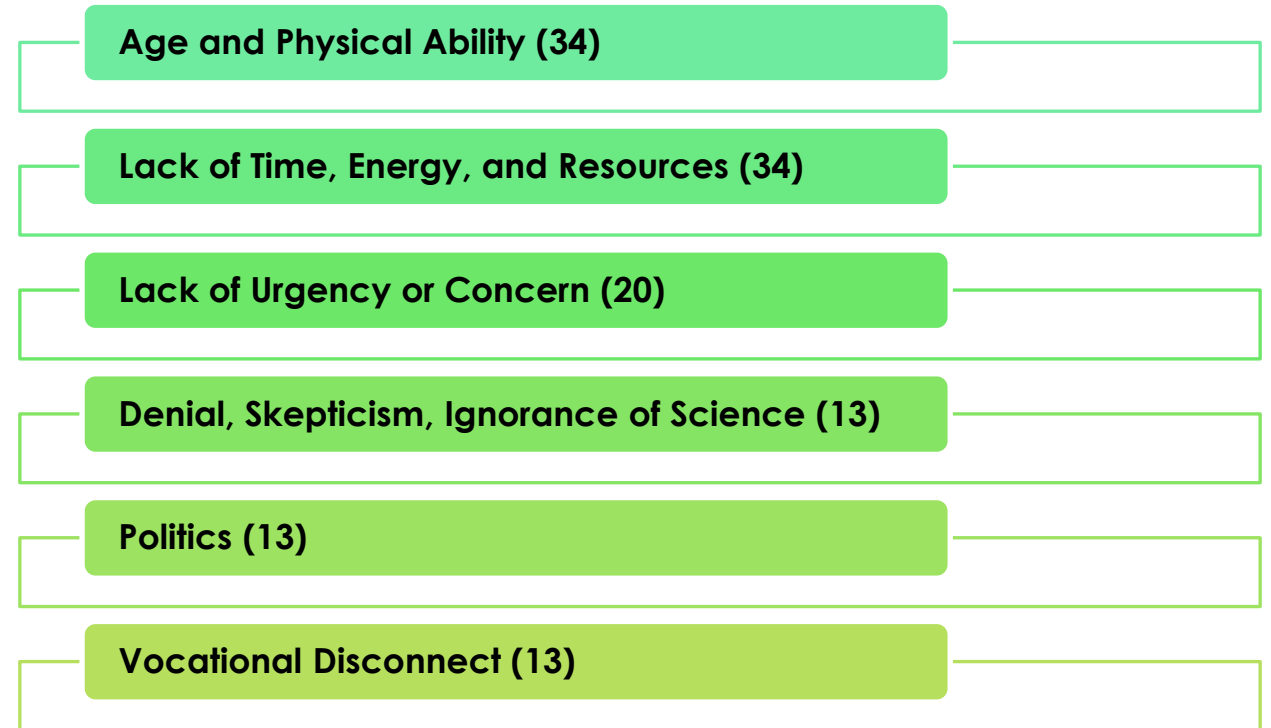
91% said they believe the teachings of the Bible or their religion call them to care for the environment.

There is a strong contrast in these responses between the responses of preachers and of congregational leaders.

Eco-Preacher participants primarily ascribe a congregation's unwillingness to engage with environmental issues due to **POLITICS**.

In contrast, the Congregational Leader's Survey stated that their primary reason was that they were **OLDER AND TIRED**.

Reasons congregational leaders give for why more people are engaged in environmental or climate action:



Eco-Preacher participants frequently attributed congregational unwillingness to **disinterest**. As one Eco-Preacher participant wrote:

“The unwillingness generally comes from people who acknowledge that climate change is an issue but don't think that it's a church issue. They want us to focus on other areas of social justice (racial reconciliation, homelessness, etc.) or want us to spend more time in pastoral care and fellowship. They see it as a zero-sum game and are not filled with the urgency that many of the rest of us are.” – EcoPreacher participant

In contrast, Congregational Leaders articulated that while people may be interested, they **simply don't know what to do**.

“I think we struggle with what, how, where...there is so much to be done, I wonder if we are overwhelmed on where to start!” – Congregational leader

Vocational disconnect

Many of the EcoPreachers AND the Congregational Leaders struggled to articulate how their religious identity connects with climate change.

- Congregational Leaders especially are engaging with environmental issues almost exclusively within technological or policy lenses (e.g., recycling, carbon footprints, or reducing use of resources).
- Or they don't believe that their Christian faith, as lived out within their congregational context, has anything to offer this moment at all.
- Many Congregational Leaders, even those who think that climate is important, do not see their Christian identity as offering anything unique to a climate-changed world.
- They rarely see it as a natural expression of their faith, just one in a long list of social justice issues.

Underdeveloped areas with potential for more robust engagement

- Engaging environmental issues through local lenses and issues
- Theological and spiritual practices with nature
- Connecting with nature and cultivating deeper kinship with Creation

Questions for Further Investigation

- 1) How do churches and their leaders understand their vocational connection to the climate crisis?
- 2) In what ways do congregations and their pastors understand the climate crisis differently? In what ways do they understand what it would look like to engage with environmental issues with their community day-to-day life?
- 3) What do these participants imagine the means-to-an-end to be? Is it a closer relationship with God's Creation? Is it "saving the planet?" What is the imagined/hopeful/expected result of this "care?"
- 4) When preachers and congregational members identify spiritual practice or theological framing as important, what places do they immediately turn to?



Questions?