



# ***ALL THAT IS WITHIN US***

The unique role churches can  
play in a climate-changed world



# Introduction

Climate change is an intensifying crisis happening at an unprecedented scale. It heightens every challenge that our society faces today: the decline of democracy, mass migration, marginalization, worsening inequality, and geopolitical violence. Therefore, climate change demands a radical renegotiation of the human experience on this shared and singular planet. This is not just the work of scientists, policymakers, advocates, or practitioners in distinct sectors. The church brings spiritual resources to this moment that cannot be replicated by any others.

With rich histories of advocating for justice and providing care, faith communities have the opportunity to envision and nurture a world in which intensifying challenges turn people toward rather than against one another.

This report tells the story of twelve New England congregations that asked:

*What can my church uniquely offer its community and watershed in a climate-changed world?*

These churches are a representative sample of New England congregations. They are both entirely exemplary and wholly ordinary. Their stories and struggles will sound familiar. They dream of new uses for their buildings, attracting new people to worship, decreasing their carbon footprint, and becoming respected partners in their community. They are concerned about aging and shrinking memberships, pressing social issues, and whether they will continue to exist into another generation.

In this report, you'll learn how these twelve congregations lived out this question and the creative and transformational answers they embodied as a result. We'll explore the unique gifts that their religious traditions offer a climate-changed world; their imaginative and impactful vocational experiments; and how they came back into touch with the wealth of resources interwoven just beneath their feet.



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*For the full research report on which this public report is based, please visit: [thebtscenter.org/applied-research](http://thebtscenter.org/applied-research).*

# The Cohort and the Research

## The Invitation

The BTS Center, Anabaptist Climate Collaborative, and Creation Justice Ministries co-led a three-day retreat and community of practice that ran from May 2024 through November 2024. This program was built on previous offerings by Creation Justice Ministries and the Anabaptist Climate Collaborative. We named it: “Claiming Your Call for a Climate-Changed World.”

The BTS Center invited congregations into a season of vocational formation to claim and deepen their unique call to ministry for our time. In this program, they engaged in community building, experimentation, and vocational formation with theologians, scientists, and Indigenous leaders.

Twelve congregations were accepted. They represented six different denominations: Episcopalian, United Methodist, United Church of Christ, Mennonite, Presbyterian (PCUSA), and Unitarian Universalist. All congregations were located in Northern New England and attuned to the region’s unique cultures and rhythms.

## Retreat and Community of Practice

*“I came away from the retreat with a clearer vision of our church’s call, and that is going to inform our actions.*

*What also happened is that the four people from our congregation got aligned on a radical intent. That’s powerful.”*

The program began with a three-day retreat at the Schoodic Institute in Acadia National Park, Maine. Congregational teams shared deep conversation with theologians, scientists, and Indigenous scholars about:

1. How climate change will impact the communities where they live, and
2. What a spiritually-grounded, justice-seeking response could look like for their churches.

They also had intentional encounters with the more-than-human world and with scripture, and they participated in facilitated discernment sessions within and across congregational teams. On the evening of the summer solstice, the group gathered for a service of lament and confession around the campfire. They mourned species in Maine that were threatened, endangered, or extinct as a result of environmental degradation, and they confessed their part in harming the more-than-human community.

At the end of the retreat, congregational teams were invited to name their sense of communal call and were commissioned into “small experiments with radical intent,” which enabled them to put their discernment into practice. Each Small Experiment was:

1. An authentic expression of the radical intent they discerned for their congregation;
2. Actionable by those who did not participate in the retreat, such as congregation members and others in their community and watershed;
3. Planned, implemented, and reported between the conclusion of the retreat (June 2024) and November 2024.

From July until November, congregations collaboratively learned and reflected with program leaders while they undertook their small experiments with radical intent. These Small Experiments varied from canning classes to outdoor worship and from pollinator gardens to election respite forest chapels. In November, the Claiming Your Call community gathered online to celebrate what each congregation had learned through their Small Experiment.



*The three-day retreat at the Schoodic Institute*

## Research Methodology

“Congregational vocation” or “congregational call” was central to the Claiming Your Call program. As such, this program allowed us to study what shaped this sense of communal call, how that call was lived within the complexities of congregational life, and how vocational discernment could shift a congregation’s self-identity and actions.

We pursued two primary questions for investigation:

1. *How do spiritual leaders and faith communities understand their vocation in a climate-changed world? How do these understandings shift over time?*
2. *How did the Claiming Your Call program shift each team’s understanding of their congregation’s vocation in a climate-changed world? Did these shifts extend to the broader congregation as a result of the team’s participation in the Claiming Your Call program?*

We engaged with these questions using quantitative and qualitative social science methods. These included entrance and exit questionnaires with Claiming Your Call participants, which included questions about climate emotions, congregational burnout, relationship to creation, motivations for climate engagement, and connections in the broader community. We analyzed the open-ended questions inductively, looking for themes most frequently mentioned by respondents and comparing how these changed between the entrance and exit questionnaires.

After the retreat, we field noted Small-Experiment listening sessions with each congregational team. At the end of the program, we also received reports on each team's Small Experiment. To one congregation, the Mennonite Congregation of Boston, we also undertook a site visit to learn about the congregation's lived experience of vocation after the retreat.

After this work was completed, we invited the program leadership team, three program participants representing three different congregations, and two consulting scholars to engage with the resulting material together. Each individual read the report through the lens of their unique personal and professional backgrounds.<sup>1</sup>

We then held a virtual two-hour meeting for group members to share their observations. Based on this discussion, the facilitation team identified major themes for the group to explore further. After such exploration, group members shared what seemed important from these themes, how they might communicate about this research with colleagues, and if questions arose that they hadn't asked before. The majority of this report is based on the results of that discussion.



*The three-day retreat at the Schoodic Institute*

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<sup>1</sup> For the full research report on which this public report is based, please visit: [thebtscenter.org/applied-research](https://thebtscenter.org/applied-research).

# Research Findings

## A. Vocation unearths possibility.

*Meaning-making is change-making. By participating in the Claiming Your Call program, congregations learned how to frame the climate crisis as a spiritual crisis requiring spiritual engagement, and to reframe congregational engagement through the lens of vocation. These changes in framing allowed congregations to more boldly claim their own unique role in their communities and watersheds.*

*What is the cause of the climate crisis? How do we address it?* Congregation members' answers to these questions are deeply connected to their understanding of their role as a religious community. In entrance questionnaires, Claiming Your Call participants largely mirrored the same frameworks for understanding the climate crisis that are present in broader American society.

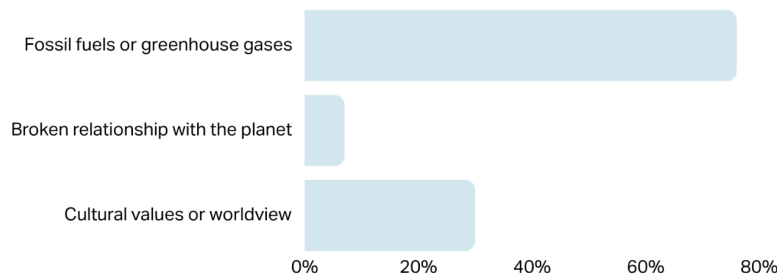


Figure 1. *What is the cause of the climate crisis?* – Entrance questionnaire responses

At the start of the program, the majority of participants indicated that the primary cause of climate change was fossil fuels or greenhouse gas emissions by a very wide margin. This perspective flowed into their understanding of the most effective ways to respond to the climate crisis: adopting green technologies such as solar panels, working to change political systems, and altering consumption habits. These three types of responses — technology, policy, and consumption — largely mirror the national discourse around climate change and environmental issues more broadly.

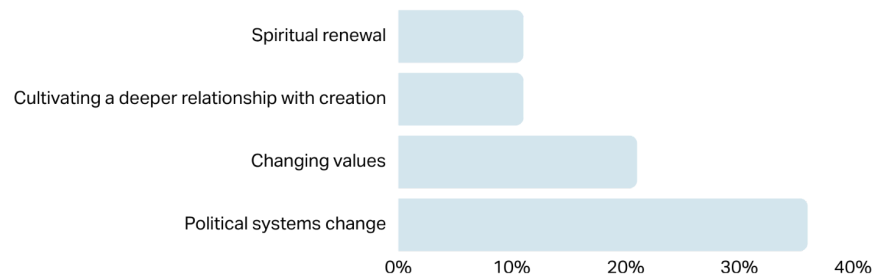


Figure 2. *How do we address the climate crisis?* – Entrance questionnaire responses

While these responses all have genuine value, they can also be deeply limiting, alienating congregations from their deeply-held religious identities as they seek to follow the culturally-predetermined “best response.” After installing solar panels, putting recycling boxes in the hallways, and calling elected representatives, church leaders often ask, “What’s next?” Frequently, underneath this question lies another:

***Does my congregation (or faith tradition) have anything unique to offer a climate-changed world?***

Without the ability to see that other types of responses to the climate crisis are possible, faithful members of many congregations answer no to this question, choosing to disambiguate their care for the environment from the practice of their faith. In the words of one participant in another BTS Center program: “I care for the environment. Don’t know what God has to do with it.”

One of the central hypotheses of the Claiming Your Call program was that if we could help congregations “change what they see” about the climate crisis and their own identities then they would be able to come away with an affirmative yes to this question instead. This “yes” could engender a wider range of responses that would enable them to minister to their communities and watersheds with a confidence rooted in their God-given identity. The lens we used to help churches expand what they saw was congregational “vocation” or “call.” “Discerning call” is not the same process as “strategic planning.” One’s call cannot be engineered or controlled. Rather, it emerges organically through divine guidance and is embodied through a process of action and reflection. Deepening one’s unique God-given identity also can necessitate releasing parts of one’s prior identity once considered important in order to sink one’s roots more deeply into a growing sense of collective vocation.

This process of stepping into vocation changed what congregations understood about the climate crisis and about themselves. This started with a dramatic shift in how participants perceived the climate crisis and their relationship to it.

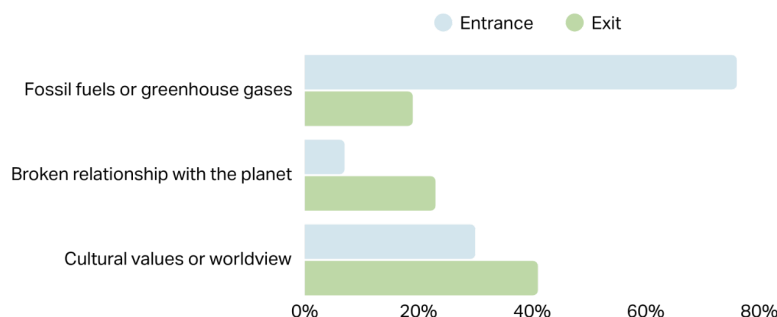


Figure 3. *What is the cause of the climate crisis?* – Entrance and exit questionnaire responses, compared

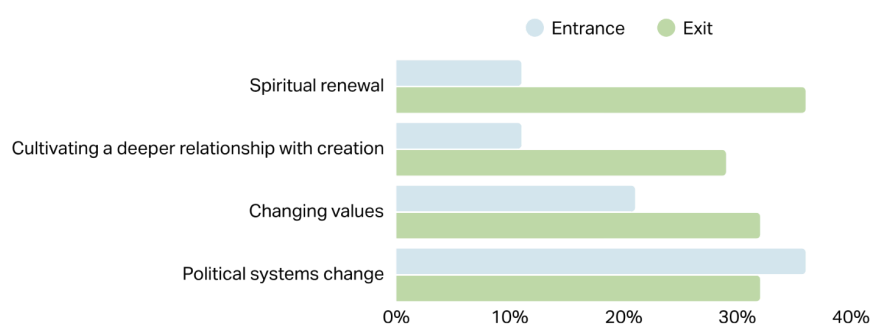


Figure 4. *How do we address the climate crisis?* – Entrance and exit questionnaire responses, compared

These shifts did not mean that participants entirely discarded the necessity of reducing greenhouse gas emissions or minimized the importance of technology, policy, or consumptive changes. Rather, their frameworks had expanded dramatically, to include a much wider range of understandings and responses that were more explicitly connected to their unique identity as a faith community.

One telling example was in how one participant responded to the question: *“Briefly describe how you understand the climate crisis – its causes and the best ways of addressing it.”*

|                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Entrance questionnaire response | “One of the biggest causes is our dependency (addiction?) to burning gas and oil for our cars and furnaces. Over consumption.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Exit questionnaire response     | “Over consumption and dependence on fossil fuels, apathy; selfishness; a misguided theology that reads ‘dominion’ as ‘domination.’ We need to view the rest of creation as being on an equal par with humanity. We need to join others in the work of restoration and the reduction of dirty energy as well as waste of resources. Adopt a ‘reverence for all life.’” |

This expanded understanding of the climate crisis gave participants additional avenues to claim their congregation's unique call in ways that were not captured by the frameworks of technology, policy, or consumption. As one participant reflected on the impact of Claiming Your Call, she shared:

*“The gist for me was that the congregations actually remembered who they were. They remember[ed] what they’re about: their traditions, the resources they bring to this [climate crisis].”*

Vocation proved to be a powerful framework for exposing invisible givens, unearthing possibilities, and helping congregations claim a role for themselves that was rooted in the most deeply-held parts of their identity.

## B. Emotional honesty empowers action.

Participants sat with the difficult emotions that are a natural response to the predicament presented by the climate crisis and by the decline of institutional religion. These emotions — which included anxiety, dread, grief, and anger — rather than being obstacles to be overcome, proved to be actively positive resources for engaging with a climate-changed world in a posture of hope and empowerment.

*What is the role of emotions in engaging a climate-changed world? Can anxiety, dread, grief, or anger be a resource for or driver of hope-filled action or are they simply obstacles to be overcome?*

Claiming Your Call offered the opportunity to learn about the role of these emotions as participants engaged with the challenge of the climate crisis and grieved the losses it caused for themselves and other-than-human kin.

Participants brought a wide range of emotions with them into Claiming Your Call. At the start, they expressed a mix of fear and empowerment as their primary responses to a climate-changed world. After the program concluded, participants articulated shifting emotions regarding climate futures. They named the same seven primary emotions around climate in the exit questionnaire with different response rates.

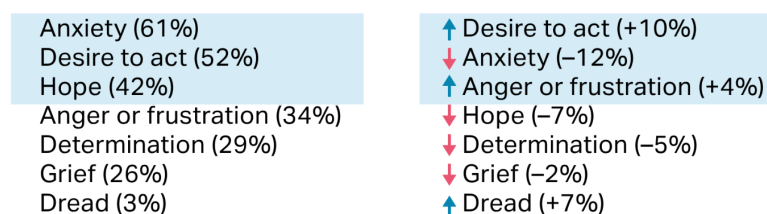


Figure 5. Change in emotions regarding climate futures

| Question                                                                           | Entrance questionnaire<br>% of yes responses | Exit questionnaire<br>% of yes responses | Change |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------|
| Do you regularly feel frustrated while working or volunteering at your church?     | 37%                                          | 48%                                      | + 11%  |
| Do you feel energized in your work at your congregation at least once a month?     | 84%                                          | 92%                                      | + 8%   |
| Can you see yourself working or volunteering at your congregation for a long time? | 35%                                          | 54%                                      | + 19%  |

Figure 6. Change in emotions regarding congregational involvement

At first glance, it may seem difficult to reconcile these apparently contradictory results. Why did participants become both more frustrated with their congregations and also more energized about working or volunteering at them? Why did Claiming Your Call increase dread and anger for participants about climate change, while also increasing their hope and desire to act? Apparently, facing and feeling their climate emotions is not an obstacle to action. Instead, it is freeing to do so, share these feelings with others, and find renewed motivation to apply oneself toward the healing of the world.

Carefully defining “hope” may be the key to understanding the experience of Claiming Your Call participants. In North America, the words “hope” and “optimism” are frequently conflated. If hope is made synonymous with optimism, then there is little reason to assume that challenging emotions can produce hope.

However, there are many alternate definitions of hope which give room for the positive expression of anger, dread, or anxiety. For instance, “active hope”, offered by Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy, is the idea of “hope as a practice” of bringing about what we hope for, regardless whether we feel hopeless or not. It appears that all of these changed emotions and behaviors point back to definitions of hope that involve collective action, greater agency, and identified pathways into the

future. As one Claiming Your Call participant articulated after the retreat, they left having “the hopeful belief...that we actually can make a difference, and that it is imperative to try.”

## C. Vocation enriches creative climate responses.

Through Claiming Your Call, congregations learned the power of the phrase “Yes, and...” for expanding the possibilities of what engagement with a climate-changed world could look like. From a narrow range of technical, consumptive, or political forms of engagement, they learned to add a wider range of forms: from community collaboration, to offering their building and grounds for new forms of environmental engagement, to spiritual practice and ritual that helped them more completely embody their vocation.

As we explored earlier, most church-centered climate literature offers three ways for congregations to respond to a climate-changed world: political advocacy, green technology, and consumption changes. These three ways have genuine value, but are also deeply limiting when offered as the exclusive means for a congregation to respond to a climate-changed world. Seeing new possibilities beyond these requires intentional imaginative practice in the context of community.

As Claiming Your Call changed what congregations saw about themselves and the climate crisis, it also expanded their imagination. This “Yes, and...” process affirmed prior approaches, while also expanding the possible responses for a congregation. Engagement with social issues is frequently framed as a zero-sum competition (e.g. caring about climate more means that your congregation will care about racial justice less). However, diverse ways of engaging with a climate-changed world are actually mutually reinforcing (e.g. caring about climate means that you will care more about racial justice because of the ways that BIPOC communities are disproportionately impacted by climate change).

Even as Claiming Your Call participants entered into a broader understanding of the climate crisis and imagined new ways that their congregation could engage with it, doing so did not seem to mean disclaiming more traditional responses. In other words, believing that the climate crisis was a spiritual crisis did not seem to decrease belief in the importance of lowering CO<sup>2</sup> in the atmosphere. Likewise, cultivating collaboration with other community organizations around shared causes (e.g. planting a pollinator garden in an abandoned lot) did not mean that congregations abandoned their recycling boxes or solar panels. Rather than eliminating possibilities, participant responses became more multi-modal. Participants were more likely to name additional means of responding to the climate crisis in the exit questionnaire than in the entrance questionnaire (such as spiritual renewal or cultivating community).

All of these responses became part of a shared vocation to care for a climate-changed world. This “Yes, and...” approach led to a profusion of possibilities for congregations as they imagined new ways of engaging with their community and watershed. Below, we recount the diverse ways congregations engaged with a climate-changed world through the Claiming Your Call program.

## Convening Community Partnerships



Many congregations stepped into a convening role as part of their commitment to community and watershed in a climate-changed world, bringing together organizational and individual partners for shared work. Examples included:

- **First Congregational Church of South Portland (South Portland, ME)** organized a forum to support the “Toss the Tanks” campaign in their community,

which advocated for the removal of oil storage tanks that stood next to local schools (pictured above).

- **Union Congregational Church of Hancock (Hancock, ME)** connected with a variety of community organizations such as Friends of Taunton Bay, Frenchman Bay Conservancy, Crabtree Neck Land Trust, and Maine Coast Heritage Trust, to understand how best to embody their community role as a Creation Justice Congregation (an official UCC designation).
- **Church of the Covenant (Boston, MA)** hosted 32 people, representing seven different faith communities, for a free lunch to share how each group was engaging in climate action and to explore how they could support one another.

## Offering Building and Grounds to Cultivate the Human and More-Than-Human Community

Congregations often turned to the literal ground beneath their feet to shape their responses to a climate-changed world. Sometimes these responses were as simple as offering their building to host an organization or a gathering. Sometimes they looked at how their grounds could be used as a means of relationship building. Examples included:

- **Saint Paul's Episcopal Church (Brunswick, ME)** looked towards their already-existing native pollinator garden to ask how their work could be further extended to deepen relationships with their Indigenous neighbors. This included planting Indigenous plants and installing a swale to “to mimic, in miniature, the alder swamp that stretched alongside

the Wabanaki Portage route from Androscoggin falls, which is about 200 yards to the west [of the church] to McCoy Bay.” They installed signage to explain to passersby the meaning and purpose of this work.

- **Cape Elizabeth United Methodist Church (Cape Elizabeth, ME)** created a pop up project in their outdoor chapel during election season with a sign: “Election Stress? Visit our chapel in the woods.”

## Community Resilience



Congregations supported building community resilience, through partnering with other organizations, by offering space for disaster preparedness, or by engaging creatively with the challenges that a climate-changed world presented to their community. Examples included:

- **First Congregational Church of West Tisbury (Martha's Vineyard, MA)** engaged with local community leadership in emergency services to learn how their church could assist with disaster planning and responses. This included seeking grants for an ongoing church renovation to help their building become a resilience hub.
- **Main Street United Methodist Church (Nashua, NH)** partnered with three non-profit organizations to create a pollinator garden in an abandoned lot in one of Nashua's heat islands (*pictured above*).

## Religious Identity and Practice

Congregations hosted public worship and rituals. Examples included:

- **Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church (Portland, ME)** led an outdoor worship service centered on their 6.5 acre parcel of land. During this time, seventy people participated in contemplative walks, story/art time, and Stations of the Earth. Throughout they asked, “Where is creation speaking to you in this moment?”
- **First Congregational Church of Camden (Camden, ME)** led two creation-care themed services and a public service of lament.
- **Mennonite Congregation of Boston (Boston, MA)** held an environment-focused worship gathering, where members shared the ways that they were already caring for the Earth.

## Education

Education took varied forms for congregations who participated in Claiming Your Call. There were multiple congregations that engaged in book studies or workshops. There were other congregations that found other ways to educate themselves and their neighbors. Examples included:



- **Saint Paul's Episcopal Church (Lynnfield, MA)** invited environmental experts to give presentations during potluck “climate cafes” that were designed to help participants engage in conversation across differences on environmental issues.

- **Taftsville Chapel Mennonite Fellowship (Taftsville, VT)** hosted a canning workshop to express their vocation as a “schoolhouse for simple living.” They have followed this up with classes on holiday crafting, sewing, and gardening, which have received a strong community response (*pictured to the left and below*).

While the diversity of these responses is impressive, this list is by no means comprehensive. In other research, we have encountered congregations that are engaging in citizen science to help deepen their understanding of their place and their history, are offering hospitality to climate refugees, or are building affordable housing, among other responses. As congregations’ collective imaginations are broadened, so too are the possibilities for engagement, all woven together in a common sense of call that only deepens their sense of vocation.



*“Schoolhouse for Simple Living”: the Small Experiment of Taftsville Chapel Mennonite Fellowship*

## D. Context can cultivate calling.

Through the Claiming Your Call program, congregations learned that the process of responding to a climate-changed world allowed them to become more deeply who they were in the places that they were already rooted. They discovered that their greatest resources for informing and answering congregational vocation were the needs and resources already present in their community, the practices and wisdom already present in their congregation, and the roots of their religious traditions themselves.

Driven by a sense of inadequacy which is intensified by institutional decline and constant professional comparisons, religious leaders can feel pressure to adopt decontextualized models to guide their work. Underlying these models, which are frequently offered with genuinely good intentions, are two unhelpful logics. The first is the logic of local inferiority: that communities and leadership do not possess, by themselves, the wisdom or resources to skillfully navigate this environmental crisis and therefore require frameworks and leadership from outside experts. The second is the logic of extraction: that “out there” lie resources — material, organizational, or spiritual — that can be extracted, fragmented, and then applied with minimal adaptation to their context.



However, there is no one-size-fits-all spiritual franchise. The challenges and complexities of context inevitably outstrip what any single universalized model can offer, leaving leaders feeling frustrated and inadequate. Therefore, the intention of the Claiming Your Call program was not to present a universal method for climate-changed ministry but rather to help leaders turn back to the knowledge and resources that were already available to them. Claiming Your Call participants identified three primary sources for this work: their religious traditions, their congregations, and their communities or watersheds.

Nashua Ink Link's coverage of Main Street UMC's Small Experiment

### Consecrate Your Compost: Claiming the Resources of Your Religious Tradition

Progressive Christians frequently express ambivalence about their religious traditions and how they relate to care of the Earth: noting accurately how the idea of a disembodied heaven, the

Doctrine of Discovery, or the rise of Christian nationalism has provided justification (in some contexts) for the exploitation of the Earth, other species, and Indigenous peoples. Claiming Your Call participants reflected this ambivalence at times as well. One participant shared how she struggled with how the word “dominion” is used in Genesis 1, by saying:

*I admit that there are verses in Genesis 1 that could support a ‘dominion’ view of humanity’s relationship to the natural world. So perhaps I am guilty of cherry-picking when I push back against that view, in favor of the Genesis 2 stewardship model. How do Christians reckon with these seemingly conflicting divine outlines for the human-nature dynamic?*

Within these “conflicting divine outlines,” we can also hear the yearning for a theological understanding of humanity’s relationship to the planetary community that is not exploitative. This would be one where, in the words of another participant:

*God loves and delights in the Earth and all its creatures and beckons us to love all of creation and find delight in creation too.*

As we have explored previously, religious frameworks provided opportunities for leaders to consider how their congregation’s response to a climate-changed world could also be an expression of collective vocation. As Claiming Your Call concluded, participants were more able to name the specific gifts of their religious tradition in responding to a climate-changed world. Mennonite participants noted their tradition’s commitment to peace, justice, and simplicity. Methodist participants noted their tradition of both personal and social holiness. Episcopalians cited their focus on their sacramentality and the Book of Common Prayer. Their religious traditions became an active resource for their work, rather than simply a complicating obstacle.

This understanding highlights one of the key resources that participants discovered in their religious traditions: theological frameworks broad enough to encompass a wide range of activities within a single narrative. Rather than seeing their engagement as a set of fragmented, sometimes competing efforts, they could instead all be expressions of the same religious identity, flowing from the same set of convictions. By consecrating their compost (and their other environmental practices), participants were able to nest their practices within larger stories that helped them reflect on the significance of their commitments, encouraged them to further action, and gave them guidelines for further decisionmaking. As one participant noted:

*Almost anything can be a response to the climate crisis. If you're holding that intention as you're doing it, you can community-garden with the intention to feed your neighbors...or you can dig your hands in the dirt and your intention [can be] to love the Earth more because it's in peril. That then compels me to take climate action in other ways. I think it's helping people nurture a particular intent in the work they're doing.*

### “Shop Your Pantry”: Embracing What the Congregation Already Does Well

Congregations learned how to celebrate their strengths rather than find new ways to lament their insufficiencies. Rather than having to look outside for new projects, they imagined how a

congregation's already-existing gifts and resources could become a form of climate-changed ministry. As one participant reflected on what she had learned, she noted:

*“There are people in the congregation who are already doing these things [environmentally focused activities]. I'm not the first person to think about it. None of us are, and it feels like the puzzle is figuring out what are other people excited about, and what are the connections that other people already have, and how do we organize ourselves around this to leverage the energy that the group already has?”*

*There's an invitation for congregations to shop their pantry first.*

Sometimes, this started by celebrating and naming what the congregation already did well. This was particularly at work in

Mennonite Congregation of Boston's Small Experiment, which involved hosting a potluck and creation-focused worship service. In doing so, they discovered the broad range of activities their congregants were already engaged in, including that a surprising number of them were participating in the “adopt a storm drain” program in their respective neighborhoods. In addition, congregations discovered that the “why” of what they did often mattered as much as what they did. One member reflected:

*Maybe, rather than trying to decide what thing would have the largest impact, we look at what impact we're already having and serve as a connector or articulator for... what lives in us already.*

In this way, theological frameworks served as a way to nest each discrete activity into a larger story that was innate to their religious tradition and provided a framework for decisionmaking around future actions.

### Embracing the Resources of Place

In New England, congregations were often founded co-terminously with their communities. Many congregations, although they have experienced both institutional decline and social marginalization, sit closer to the roots of the community than any other organization. This means that these congregations frequently possess both moral authority and convening powers that are not always accessible to other organizations. In addition, many congregations also own sizable

buildings on significant lots: resources that are often not available to other organizations in a time when the costs for construction and land have increased considerably. Participating congregations had already demonstrated some level of both interest and capacity for engaging with their broader community as a part of their application process. This engagement gave them a foundation to build upon as they reconnected with their relational and natural ecosystems that were already at work in their communities.

Participants were asked, “What do you believe that your congregation most uniquely offers your community and watershed in ways that no one else can?” In the entrance questionnaire, one participant responded: “Truthfully, I can’t think of anything. Any mission that we are involved with could be duplicated by any other worshiping congregation.” When asked the same question in the exit questionnaire, the same respondent offered: “Our location allows us to participate in many activities.” They named location, organization, and local community events with great specificity.

#### *Cape Elizabeth UMC’s Chapel in the Woods journal*



Main Street United Methodist Church in Nashua, NH provided one vivid example of what happens when a congregation engages the resources of their place to step into their vocation. As we described previously, they decided to create a pollinator garden in an abandoned lot in one of Nashua’s heat islands, choosing explicitly not to use their church grounds for the project as a way to focus on building community partnerships with non-religious organizations. This effort earned them positive news coverage by both the local newspaper and a local television station. Through the process, they learned

that building partnerships is hard work — especially with historically marginalized communities.

First Congregational Church United Church of Christ in South Portland, ME offered another example of what it means to step into vocation by stepping into community. Their Small Experiment was to hold a forum in order to rally support for a “Toss the Tanks campaign” in their community. The initial campaign failed when the high school environmental club pulled out of the project. However, through this experiment they developed campaign materials, formed new relationships, and gained clarity about their role as “conveners of wider community conversations to inspire climate action.”

*“This just helped affirm the identity that we have been trying to live out, that we are a part of, that we are an integral part of, the city, a necessary part of the city, and that we have something to offer in terms of environmental justice in the city.”*

Even though this experiment did not unfold according to the original time table and with youth leadership, they did host a community event to educate neighbors about the “Toss the Tanks” campaign in Spring 2025. Through this event, they educated attendees on the current use and impact of the tanks, described the campaign to remove them, and with leadership by a local architecture firm, imagined what could be done with the resulting freed land. This forum had about 100 attendees and received local press coverage.

Congregations found that they did not need to adopt an external set of principles, a different religious tradition, or go to a different community or watershed to authentically embody their sense of vocation. All that they needed was already present. Their traditions offered meaning-making power to help guide their engagement. Their congregations already possessed a wealth of resources. They discovered that they were part of a broader ecosystem, human and other-than-human, with which they could partner in the work they were called to do.

## E. What if this is a problem that cannot be solved?

Challenges like “climate change” are often framed as problems that can and should be solved — a framing that is itself a product of white, western modernity. Through the Claiming Your Call program, congregations came into contact with the limits of their own agency. As they did so, they shifted their attention to inhabiting their vocation with integrity. They recognized the importance of cultivating relationships and living into their sense of identity as critical aspects of climate-based action. This engagement was done in an ongoing, open-ended way, rather than based on time-bound solutions, discrete deliverables, or numeric metrics of success.

The white western worldview tends to frame challenges as problems that require solutions. While this framing works well in certain instances, it is less able to grapple with challenges that are long-term, unpredictable and open-ended. For Claiming Your Call participants, reframing the climate crisis as a spiritual crisis that requires a collective vocational response also invited them to reframe it as a complex predicament rather than a complicated problem. In a culture where it is frequently implicitly (or even explicitly) discouraged to suggest that any challenge cannot be solved, this reframing also encouraged participants to reckon with the limits of their own power. As one participant reflected in the exit questionnaire:

*There is a mismatch of scale that is at the root of this problem [the climate crisis] coupled with hedonism. We are so focused on our own pleasure and we can't see the broader impacts of our lifestyles beyond the here and now... I think this sense of culpability creates blinders for me at least in that I don't know where to start without feeling so enmeshed in the problems.*

This “mismatch of scale” was reinforced over the course of Claiming Your Call, as participants began to discover the limitations of their own agency in “solving” the challenges facing their congregations, communities, and watersheds. In both entrance and exit questionnaires, we asked participants: “By 2030, how would you know that your congregation has been successful in its ministries?”

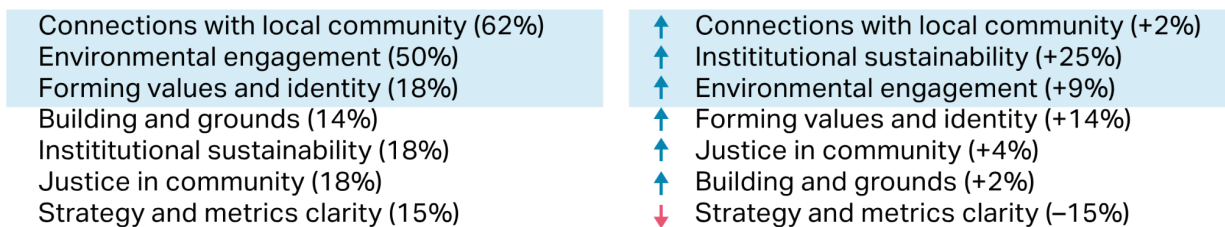


Figure 7. Measures of congregations’ ministerial success

The response that increased the most dramatically was institutional sustainability for their congregation. It is possible that the Claiming Your Call program both helped participants come into contact with their collective limits and also gave them new reasons for wanting their congregation to continue existing.

At times, participants were candid about what they learned about the limits of their power to “solve” anything. One person reflected:

*We're small and... aging, and I don't know how effective we're going to be. And also on our list of things to pay attention to...are more existential things for our congregation itself: building, funding all sorts of things, just in terms of obstacles. We are charged up on this issue [climate]. We've got a few [issues] on the plate. Some are existential in other ways. [e.g. the continued survival of the congregation.]*



Main Street UMC in Nashua, NH, planning for and preparing their pollinator garden

For Claiming Your Call participants, coming up against the limits of their agency was clearly a bracing experience. This did not appear to lead to discouragement but, rather, to the opposite. Why was it that both their frustration and enthusiasm rose in tandem (See Figure 7)? What helped them both encounter their limitations while also deepening their long-term commitment for the work? Our hypothesis is that this happened because participants' sources for motivation shifted as they accepted the limits of their agency. Many participants started the Claiming Your Call program with a belief in their ability to "solve" the climate crisis (or any other environmental issue) as their motivation. However, their sources of motivation shifted from marking discrete accomplishments to cultivating relationships and deepening collective identity.

As participants defined what success looked like for their congregations at the end of the



Claiming Your Call program, many still did name discrete accomplishments to which they aspired: whether that be growing their church's membership, using their grounds more productively, engaging in green practices, or starting up new programs. However, they also spoke with great specificity about the local organizations with whom they wanted to be in partnership and their desire to visibly exercise moral leadership in their community. They also talked about success as deepening their vocational identity by living their core values, practicing their commitments more intentionally, or becoming refugia.

#### *Taftsville Chapel Mennonite Fellowship*

This shift in their sources of motivation allowed them to frame their commitment to a climate-changed world as ongoing and open-ended, rather than something that needed a discrete end date. As one participant said at the end of the program:

***I'm not sure there's any real end game. We just have to keep trying to do the best we can!***

However, this re-orientation towards relationship and identity did not lead to detached fatalism. In fact, it is quite probable that the increased level of participant engagement in environmental issues was a key reason they experienced greater hope, enthusiasm, and long-term commitment for the work. The difference is that rather than being able to declare the work "done," each congregational project instead motivated them to more deeply inhabit the vocation that they had felt called into. Their actions shaped their identity, rather than being ancillary to it.

## Conclusion

These congregations do not offer the church a way to “solve” the global crisis in front of us. Our shared planetary future, which feels increasingly unpredictable and uncontrollable, points out the long-term limitations of motivation that depend upon outcomes or our ability to “fix” anything. Rather, these churches bear witness to a way for religious communities to “be” in a world where solutions look increasingly impossible.

Their journey invokes a new question for us:

*What if the integrity of our practice was our success?*

We can disclaim fossil fuels, even if the oceans rise anyway. We can compost, even if ecosystems continue to be desecrated. We can advocate, even if politicians ignore us. We can reach out, even if our neighbors spurn our helping hands. We can inhabit our unique communal identities, even if others find them incomprehensible or threatening.

There is no guaranteed future for our planet. There are certainly no guaranteed futures for these congregations. The challenges facing them, their communities, and their watersheds largely remained unchanged from the beginning of the Claiming Your Call program to the end. No doubt they will experience both triumphs and trials entirely beyond their control in the years to come. However, these congregations offer their lived example: regardless of what the future holds, we have the ability to choose how we respond to it. Judging by what they shared with us, they are choosing to face it with creativity, courage, and hope.

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For the full research report on which this public report is based, please visit:  
[thebtscenter.org/applied-research](http://thebtscenter.org/applied-research).