

Taking Action on Climate Change: The Eco-Mission of the Church in a Critical Time



We are in a climate emergency.

Climate scientists have been sounding the call for decades. In recent years their call has turned to a ringing alarm: **we must act, we must act together, and we must act urgently** if we do not want to see massive suffering and death because of climate change. Already we are experiencing the effects of a warming climate caused primarily by human activity: an increase in extreme weather events leading to droughts and fires and floods. As is always the case in these catastrophes, it is those most vulnerable to harm—fragile ecosystems, impoverished peoples—who bear the brunt of suffering and death.

However, **there is good news.**

For us as Christians, the good news always starts with this: “God so loved the world” (John 3:16). God our Creator, the Creator of the earth and all that is in it, has crafted all things in love and deemed them “very good” (Genesis 1:31). We live and move and have our being in the God who is love (Acts 17:28; 1 John 4:16). Every time we as humans have destroyed God’s good world in our hubris through violence or greed, God has stepped into this world through faithful people to reverse the tide of suffering and death (e.g. Genesis 6:5-6; 9:8-17). The incarnation of God in Christ, God entering God’s good world through Jesus, is the ultimate instance of this divine redemption of the world God loves (John 1:18; Colossians 1:15-23). In Jesus God is shown to be the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not yet exist” (Romans 4:17). With God, new life is always possible, even in the midst of suffering and death.

God calls us as the church to live into this mission. Prompted by God’s love for the world and emboldened by resurrection hope, God summons us to enter into the groaning of God’s suffering creation, to walk in solidarity with all that suffers because of human greed and violence, walking toward newness and fullness of life (Romans 8:18-27). God calls us to care for creation, to stand with and stand up for the vulnerable, and to resist non-violently the powerful forces of evil in this world opposed to God’s good purposes (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:7-9, 15; Isaiah 1:16-17; Luke 4:16-21; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5; Ephesians 6:10-18; Revelation 12:10-11).

There is also good news related to climate change.

Although some effects of a warming climate are now inevitable and will require us to adapt, we can still act now to avoid many of the most devastating effects of climate change. According to the most recent reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the earth has warmed 1.09 °C since pre-industrial times, now proven to be almost entirely because of human activity. Increased extreme weather is now clearly tied to climate change. Sea-level rise and glacier melt are now virtually irreversible. If we continue on this path the earth will warm to well over 2 °C since pre-industrial times by the end of this century, coastal regions will be under 2-6 metres of water, many species will become extinct, fragile ecosystems will be damaged beyond repair, and large segments of the globe currently populated by humans will be uninhabitable.

But there are still things we can do. If we reduce carbon dioxide emissions to net zero and other greenhouse gas emissions significantly during this decade, we can avert some of the worst effects of climate change. This is good news, but it is no small task.

We call on all members and congregations and regional churches of our Mennonite Church Canada family to join together in this eco-mission. We must act, we must act together, and we must act urgently.

The six initiatives that follow reflect our working commitments as a nationwide church. They come out of consultation across our nationwide church with working groups, regional boards, and more. Our leaders have resolved to tackle these six initiatives as a work-in-progress, to work together as regional churches with our congregations to live into these realities.

We invite members and congregations to join in this journey, to explore what each individual and congregation can do in their own sphere to reduce fossil fuel use, to reduce consumption of disposable goods, to support local resourcing of goods and services, to walk in solidarity with Indigenous people and other land and water defenders, to attend to those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, to call on governments and energy corporations to act for a just transition to green energy, and more.

Initiative #1: Broaden the mandate of Mennonite Church Canada's Sustainability Leadership Group.

We already have structures and groups in place to help us in our eco-mission as a church. The Sustainability Leadership Group (SLG) is the key group related to this at the nationwide level, established in 2020. Its current mandate is to:

- clearly express commitment and provide leadership to improve sustainability of ministries as a response to our faith calling;
- recommend ways Mennonite Church Canada can reduce negative environmental and social impacts of its activities; and
- invite partners to collaborate together to address sustainability of their activities.

We are working to expand the SLG to include representation from all five regional churches and to broaden the SLG's focus to include:

- connecting with and providing resources for regional climate action groups;
- developing goals and guidelines related specifically to climate change, such as reducing travel for Mennonite Church Canada activities; developing offset systems and options for travel for individual, congregational, regional, and nationwide activities; and developing tools for congregations to take direct action, such as climate audits; and
- developing a funding program for congregations to "green" their church using money from carbon offsets.

Initiative #2: Create space for our youth to engage on the climate crisis.

Climate change affects us all, but it will have the longest impact on our youth. It is vital that we hear the voices of our youth and empower them to participate in this work.

Each regional church Executive Minister has personally committed to seek out youth perspectives to hear the fears and hopes, concerns and ideas of our youth. Our EMG (Executive Minister's Group, formerly Executive Staff Group) will help our regions identify youth who have aptitude and interest in this area and find ways to include their voices and energy into the eco-mission of the church.

Regional and congregationally based climate working groups are encouraged to seek out youth involvement in their groups or through youth-focused events. The SLG will also seek youth participation from our five regional churches.

Initiative #3: Open discernment about “simple living” and encourage our congregations and members toward this path.

We have a tool at our disposal in our eco-mission, a tool to counter the culture of consumption that has fueled the climate crisis: the traditional Mennonite value of “simple living.” Simple living comes from an Anabaptist understanding of what it means to follow Jesus faithfully, paying attention to his teachings on wealth and possessions and trust in God, and following in his way of simplicity (Matthew 6:1-33; Luke 6:20-49). Simple living requires a re-orientation in how we think about wealth and privilege, and it calls us live in generosity, hospitality, hopefulness, and joy.

We encourage individuals, families, congregations, and regional churches to grapple with Jesus' teachings and way of life to work out what Jesus' way of simple living should look like in their own lives and context. How can we reduce consumption? How we can streamline our possessions? How can we minimize or eliminate our use of fossil fuels? How can we live out our trust in God who provides our daily bread?

As regional and nationwide church leaders, we are committed to exploring what this looks like as wider church bodies. We invite congregations to create spaces for discipleship, teaching, and faith formation which are generative and positive, not prescriptive or condemning. We invite all church leaders to join us in seeking to model simple living in our own lives.

Initiative #4: Explore divestment/investment options related to mitigating climate change.

Jesus teaches us that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:34). How we use our money reflects our commitments and values. Because of this, and because money can speak louder than words, we are looking at where we bank and how pension plans and other monies are invested. Are we supporting banks which fund major oil and gas companies who are not fully committed to a just transition to green energy? Are we investing in funds that do not match our Mennonite values and our desire to care for creation?

The interconnectedness in Canada's financial system makes this difficult to assess. For example, the current Mennonite Church Canada investment plans are fossil fuel free, but 30% is invested in banks who bankroll the petroleum industry; there may not be a way for us to avoid this. Just as it is impossible for us to avoid all fossil fuel use, enmeshed as we are in an economic and social system

built on fossil fuels, so it is difficult to fully “dis-enmesh” ourselves from all investment connection to fossil fuels. However, we have identified the following areas for investigation and possible action:

- Produce a clear summary statement of how Mennonite Church Canada is making investment choices that align with our values and what that looks like for our investment, banking, operational choices that impact the climate.
- Focus on investing in instruments that have a positive impact on climate change. We note that this emphasis was the recommendation of a 2016 report by a Climate Change Working Group to Mennonite Church Canada.
- Consider switching Mennonite Church Canada banking services to a credit union, avoiding the large Canadian banks which bankroll the fossil fuel industry.
- Balance climate concern with financial viability, especially as it pertains to our pastors’ and staff pension funds.

In addition, as noted above under the first initiative, we are committed to developing a carbon offset program for travel within Mennonite Church Canada. We encourage congregations and regional churches to explore these same kinds of divestment and investment strategies within their contexts as part of our eco-mission as a church.

Initiative #5: Set up an Mennonite Church Canada web page to provide Creation Care and Climate Action resources for congregations and working groups.

We have many congregations and some regional and nationwide working groups taking action on creation care and climate change, engaging in the front lines of our eco-mission. We need a central hub for this work, to hear the stories of what we are doing across our nationwide church, to share resources to energize and mobilize us in the work. While the SLG will function as this hub in many ways, this web page will provide a necessary space for the kind of sharing and collaboration we need. This website will include:

- This document and other material providing theological, practical, worship, and faith formation resources for congregations.
- A news feed highlighting climate-related news from across our regional churches.
- Links to the SLG and regional working groups and their web pages (if applicable).
- Links to resources from CommonWord, Mennonite Creation Care Network, and other partner organizations.

Initiative #6: Commit funds to support Mennonite Church Canada’s climate actions.

Again, where our money goes is a reflection of our commitments and values. If we truly see our eco-mission as important, we should support it with our financial resources.

There is currently no funding for the SLG, or for the Mennonite Creation Care Network in Canada. Adequate resources are required for Mennonite Church Canada to move toward its climate response goals. Part-time staffing may be required to coordinate the SLG, curate resources for the new website, link with regional working groups, and connect with other partners in this work.

Mennonite Church Canada is funded through its regional church members, based on giving from congregations and individuals to their regional church. Mennonite Church Canada's Executive Minister, along with the regional Executive Ministers and the Joint Council, are exploring ways to include funding for these initiatives in Mennonite Church Canada's budget. Individuals who wish to designate donations to this ministry can do so once programs have been put in place.

Initiative #7: Yet to be written...

What other initiatives should we undertake as part of our church's eco-mission? What should be done at the nationwide level, in our regions, in our congregations and communities? How can we care for creation, stand with and stand up for the vulnerable, and resist non-violently the powerful forces of evil in this world opposed to God's good purposes? As you reflect on these questions, we encourage you to use the following shared understandings as a guide.

Is this initiative centred on Jesus? As Mennonites we believe Jesus is central to our faith and life. How is your proposed initiative shaped by our Mennonite understanding of Jesus and the good news he proclaimed? How does it grow out of our desire to be faithful followers of Jesus in his teachings and way of life? How does it reflect Mennonite values which we believe grow out of this Jesus-centredness, values like nonviolence, simplicity, concern for the vulnerable, communal discernment, desire for the common good, pursuit of a just peace, and so on?

Is this initiative focused on congregations? As Mennonites we believe the church to be the visible community of faithful followers of Jesus. Our church structure is built on the understanding that the local congregation is the primary locus of the church's ministry in the world—not regional or nationwide staff or leaders. How does your proposed initiative grow out of your congregation's calling and context? How does it utilize your congregation's gifts? How does it strengthen your congregation's life and witness? How does it coordinate with other congregations, enabling you to work together for these goals?

Is this initiative rooted in relationships? As people of reconciliation walking in the way of Jesus, we believe that genuine, healthy relationships are vital. How is your proposed initiative grounded in relationships with the people most impacted by it? How is it connected into relationships your congregation has within your immediate community, relationships our regional churches have with other regional denominations and organizations, and the nationwide church with national and international bodies? How does it nurture these relationships in meaningful, non-utilitarian ways, not coercing others to your cause or using those relationships simply as a means to an end?

Does this initiative lean into partnerships? We are blessed with many like-minded partners, partners like Canadian Foodgrains Bank, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Community Peacemaker Teams (CPT), Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA), Mennonite Creation Care Network, and Mennonite World Conference. Each of these already has programs in place in response to the climate crisis. As regional churches and congregations we already work with MCC on refugee support, including support for climate refugees; we can continue working with them to do this work. CPT is already doing the work of walking with Indigenous land and water defenders; our regional working groups and congregations interested in supporting this work can learn from them.

As you think of any new initiative, how does it lean into these kinds of partnerships? How can it lean into other already existing partnerships with like-minded people and organizations in your community? How might it create new partnerships? How does our role in these partnerships effectively use our distinctive gifts as a church (theology, liturgy, ethics, service) while celebrating and relying on the distinctive gifts of our partners? How can these partnerships be mutually beneficial to accomplish shared goals?

Finally, *does this initiative share our power?* We all possess power in different ways and to differing degrees, the ability to change circumstances to meet our needs or the needs of others. We have this power because of many factors: social status, wealth, race, gender, social connections, and more. Jesus models for us how to use our power: to walk with the disempowered, to share our power with them, to use our power to bring justice, peace, and flourishing life for all. How does your proposed initiative utilize the power you possess to influence change in order to reflect the above shared understandings? How does it empower your congregation to influence change to reflect these understandings? How does it empower those who are often marginalized and thus disempowered in these ways? In a climate crisis where those most disempowered are most at risk of harm, this sharing of power is critical.

Once again, we invite members and congregations to join in this journey, to explore what each individual and congregation and regional church can do in their own sphere to reduce fossil fuel use, to reduce consumption of disposable goods, to support local resourcing of goods and services, to walk in solidarity with Indigenous people and other land and water defenders, to attend to those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, to call on governments and energy corporations to act for a just transition to green energy, and more.

Our God who is love, who created all things good in love, is with us on this journey. Wherever this journey takes us, whatever the future holds, this is good news indeed.

Resources for Study and Conversation

We encourage individuals and congregations to use this document for study and conversation. Read carefully through the introduction again, taking time to read the Scripture passages noted. Work through the six initiatives, asking how you and your congregation can get involved. Explore other initiatives for you, your congregation, or your regional church using the five shared understandings as a guide. Note also our Mennonite Creation Canada Creation Care and Climate Action web page, at www.mennonitechurch.ca/climate-action.

The following “Taking Action on Climate Change” reading list is also available to peruse at CommonWord – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2800>

Taking Action on Climate Change Reading List

Climate Science Resources

- *The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2801>. A one-stop shop for the science on climate change. Note especially the non-technical reports for policy-makers and the public. Also includes the most recent Special Reports and information on the upcoming Synthesis Report.

- *Global Weirding* – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2802>. Christian Canadian climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe produces non-technical videos addressing common questions around the science of climate change, solutions for climate change, and how people of faith can think about these things.

Broader Theological Resources

- *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2090>. Our denominational confession of faith, including a key statement on “Christian Stewardship” which calls for care of creation.
- *A Joint Message for the Protection of Creation* – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2531>. The first ever joint statement by the leaders of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Anglican Communion, together representing the vast majority of Christians in the world.
- *Laudato Si* – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2803>. An encyclical letter from Pope Francis “On Care for Our Common Home,” incorporating ideas paralleled in Anabaptist theology and ethics.

Resources for Creation Care

- *Creation Care Task Force* – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2804>. The task force of the Mennonite World Conference, the global community of Anabaptist churches to which Mennonite Church Canada belongs.
- *Mennonite Creation Care Network* – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2805>. Resourcing Mennonite Christians and churches toward care for creation. Many good resources available here.
- *Every Creature Singing* – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2528>. The Canadian edition of a resource produced by Mennonite Creation Care Network, this is a study guide for small-group discussion on the biblical/theological basis for creation care, pursuing climate justice and peace, and developing a sustainable lifestyle.
- *God’s Green Church* – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2610>. Produced by Mennonite Church Canada’s Sustainability Leadership Group in partnership with King’s University College, this is a guide for congregations looking to develop a “green committee” to guide the church toward environmental sustainability.

Resources for Climate Action

- *Canada’s Green New Deal: Forging the socio-political foundations of climate resilient infrastructure?* – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2806>. An introduction to this initiative with good descriptions of the work necessary to bring about large-scale change in Canadian society to mitigate the effects of climate change.
- *Acting on Climate Change: Solutions from Canadian Scholars-* <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2807>. A project of scientists from across Canada highlighting the areas of change needed in Canadian society to make a significant difference in slowing or reversing climate change.

- *A Good War: Mobilizing Canada for the Climate Emergency* - <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2510>. This book by Seth Klein is the focus of a Mennonite Church Canada study group sponsored by the SLG. Klein explores what needs to happen in Canadian political, economic, and social structures for us to respond effectively to climate change.
- *Faith Climate Justice Waterloo Region* – <https://www.commonword.ca/go/2808>. An initiative started by MCEC congregations and a great example of what faith communities working together for local municipal action can look like.

Mennonite Church Canada’s resource centre, CommonWord, has many additional resources on creation care and climate change/action:

- [Creation Care – https://www.commonword.ca/go/2256](https://www.commonword.ca/go/2256)
- [Climate Change/Action – https://www.commonword.ca/go/2068](https://www.commonword.ca/go/2068)

This document has been prepared by the Executive Ministers of Mennonite Church Canada and its five regional churches—Mennonite Churches British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Eastern Canada—after consultation with the Joint Council of Mennonite Church Canada. We are grateful to members of our Mennonite Church Canada family who have prompted us toward these initiatives.