

Understanding and Assessing Climate Change: Preparing for Nebraska's Future

2024 Climate Change Impact Assessment Report

Chapter 13 - The Response of Faith Communities



Chapter 13

The Response of Faith Communities

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Key Messages

1. Religion has a unique capacity to help society address human-caused climate change.
2. Nebraska religious leaders have largely remained silent rather than inspiring their members to take climate action that is faithful to their tradition.
3. Nebraska religious leaders have generally not incorporated climate change into preaching, advocacy, prayer, education, or institutional action.
4. Partisan identity appears to trump religious tradition on climate change for some believers.
5. The federal Inflation Reduction Act and Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy ONE RED Non-Residential Solar Program could potentially fund greenhouse gas emissions reduction projects in religious communities.¹

¹ Religious institutions, such as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, supported the passage of the IRA which allocated nearly \$400 billion for clean energy and climate action (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2022). However, the 2025 One Big Beautiful Bill Act, signed by President Trump (H.R. 1 - 119th Congress, 2025), and unanimously supported by Nebraska's congressional delegation (Arena, 2025), severely restricted and eliminated vast amounts of IRA clean energy funding. As of August 2025, ONE RED remains a potential funding opportunity for clean energy and efficiency initiatives within religious communities (NDEE, 2024d).

Introduction

Religion has a unique capacity to help society address human-caused climate change. Throughout this chapter, “climate change” means human-caused, that is, anthropogenic. Many religious traditions recognize climate change as a moral issue and call for science-based action (Wells, 2023). This research shows that over the past 10 years, religious leaders in Nebraska and across the country have generally remained silent rather than inspiring their members to take climate action that is faithful to their tradition.

Since 79% of Nebraskans identify with a religious tradition (Table 13.1), mainly Christianity, Nebraska’s faith leaders can play a crucial role in framing and motivating climate action (Salter & Wilkinson, 2024).

In this chapter, we highlight religious teachings that recognize a moral responsibility to address climate change and note opportunities for religious leaders to educate, implement their own teachings, and inspire their communities to act. Finally, we present findings from survey results designed to explore whether and why Nebraska religious leaders have or have not pursued these opportunities

Background

Nearly all religious traditions teach about the need to care for God’s creation. Many have formal, authoritative teachings that recognize a moral responsibility to address human-caused climate change. These often recognize that the effects of climate change harm neighbors whom believers are called to love—especially and disproportionately the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized for whom most religious traditions have special concern (IPCC, 2023a, p. 1172).

The unequal impact of climate change on the poor is especially unjust since wealthy people and communities are most responsible for the problem. The U.S. has the largest economy by GDP and just 4% of global population but is responsible for 20% of historic carbon pollution (1850–2022)—more than China, India, and the 45 least developed countries combined (United Nations Environment Program, 2024, p. xiii). U.S. (18 tCO₂e) were 64% higher than in China (11

Table 13.1. Religious Composition of Adults in Nebraska. (Source: Pew Research Center, 2014a)

CHRISTIAN	75%
Evangelical Protestant	25%
Mainline Protestant	24%
Catholic	23%
Historically Black Protestant	2%
Mormon	1%
Orthodox Christian	<1%
Jehovah's Witness	<1%
Other Christian	<1%
NON-CHRISTIAN FAITHS	4%
Buddhist	1%
Hindu	1%
Other Faiths	1%
Jewish	<1%
Muslim	<1%
Other World Religions	<1%
UNAFFILIATED (RELIGIOUS "NONES")	20%
Nothing in particular	15%
Agnostic	4%
Atheist	1%
DON'T KNOW	1%

tCO₂e) and six times higher than in India (2.9 tCO₂e) (United Nations Environment Program, 2024, p. xiii).

Some of the many teachings about climate change from world religions include:

» **Mainline Protestant:**

- “Global warming threatens the very fabric of God’s creation and will hit those who are least able to adapt—both human and nonhuman—the hardest. Because the Christian community is called to justice, to be good ‘neighbors’ with our brothers and sisters across the globe, and to steward God’s creation, addressing global warming is a moral imperative and a Christian call” (National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 2006).
- “An accounting of climate change that has credibility and integrity must name the neglect and carelessness of private industry and the failure of government leadership that have contributed to these changes. However, it also must include repentance for our own participation as individual consumers and investors in economies that make intensive and insistent demands for energy” (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2015).

» **Evangelical Protestant:** “As followers of Jesus, we need to respond to the suffering of those most directly affected by the degradation of God’s creation . . . climate change interacts with other challenges people face” (National Association of Evangelicals, 2022, p. 19).

» **Historically Black Protestant:** “We stand together with many other leaders of faith who are calling for urgent action on climate change on behalf of the world’s poor and God’s creation” (African Methodist Episcopal Church, 2016).

» **Catholic:** “[The] ‘greenhouse effect’ has now reached crisis proportions as a consequence of industrial growth, massive urban concentrations and vastly increased energy needs . . . I wish to repeat that *the ecological crisis is a moral issue*” (St. John Paul II, 1990, nos. 6, 15, emphasis in original).

» **Orthodox Christian:** “For human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate . . . these are sins” (Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, 2012, p. 99).

» **Jewish:** “The Torah portion of Noach details a terrible environmental disaster—God’s punishment for humankind’s despicable behavior. Today, as our reckless actions drive climate change, we are once again experiencing widespread destruction of the Earth. . . . When climate change irreparably damages our world—God’s world, the world of future generations—it will be too late” (Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, 2024).

» **Muslim:** “The same fossil fuels that helped us achieve most of the prosperity we see today are the main cause of climate change. Excessive pollution from fossil fuels threatens to destroy the gifts bestowed on us by God” (Islamic Leaders, 2015).

» **Buddhist:** “There is still time to slow the pace of climate change and limit its impacts, but to do so . . . [leaders] will need to put us on a path to phase out fossil fuels. We must ensure the protection of the most vulnerable, through visionary and comprehensive mitigation and adaptation measures” (Buddhist Leaders, 2015).

In 2021, nearly 40 global religious leaders signed a joint Appeal to the United Nations (Vatican, 2021).

The statement called the world to “achieve net zero carbon emissions as soon as possible” and committed the represented religious communities to a variety of corresponding activities. For example, the leaders committed to facilitating “ecological conversion” through religious education and “participating actively and appropriately in the public and political discourse on environmental issues.”

Although they recognized the importance of civic action, the leaders stressed “the importance of taking far-reaching environmental action within our own institutions and communities, informed by science and based on religious wisdom. While calling on governments and international organizations to be ambitious, they also recognized the major role we play.”

To ensure faithfulness to their traditions and preserve their credibility to advocate in society, the leaders committed their religious communities to take concrete internal actions like “supporting actions to reduce carbon emissions . . . working to make bold plans to achieve *full sustainability in our buildings* . . . striving to align our financial investments with environmentally and socially responsible standards . . . [and] evaluating all the goods we purchase and the services we hire with the same ethical lens” (emphasis in original).

Opportunities

Backed by such consistent and authoritative teachings, religious leaders in Nebraska can inspire members of their communities to address climate change through preaching, communal prayer, bulletin inserts, and other aspects of worship services (Antal, 2023). And leaders can incorporate climate change teachings into faith formation programs, school curricula, and other religious community education pathways.

Leaders can also assess the current emissions from their buildings, schools, and other facilities and then commit to fundraising for and implementing comprehensive science-based reductions. Religious communities have accessed federal funding through the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act. For example, Horizons Community United Methodist Church in Lincoln, installed solar panels with a \$21,600 IRA federal tax credit and a grant from Nebraska Interfaith Power and Light (Israel, 2024). The project will save the church \$3,000 per year on its utility bill, pay for itself in 12 years, and yield subsequent annual savings it can earmark to support additional ministries.

These direct mitigation activities may inspire other religious and secular institutions to reduce emissions. Leaders can advocate for public policies to address climate change as individuals and on behalf of their religious community (Pope Benedict XVI, 2009). Their moral authority can persuade

elected officials to better care for creation and inspire community members to similarly engage in faithful citizenship on behalf of our common home.

In this chapter, we conducted two studies to explore whether and why Nebraska religious leaders have or have taken such steps in the past decade. The first surveyed local religious community leaders in Nebraska. The second surveyed Nebraskans who are not likely local religious community leaders. Together, these studies revealed the same reality: Nebraska’s religious leaders have largely remained silent and inactive rather than inspiring and helping society to address human-caused climate change.

Surveys of Nebraska’s faith communities

Survey 1: Religious Leaders

The first study fielded an online survey sent to leaders of local religious communities, such as congregations, parishes, synagogues, mosques, or other groupings of persons within a larger faith tradition (Table 13.2). This survey included demographic questions, questions about belief in and potential actions to address human-caused climate change, and questions about why respondents had or had not taken the identified potential actions. A complete list of the questions can be found in Appendix B.

The survey was open from February 14 to March 13, 2024, and distributed twice through a dataset of 1,782 email addresses. The dataset was constructed using public directories and includes general email addresses for local religious communities and direct email addresses for local religious community leaders. The first email was sent to the complete list on February 14, 2024, and yielded 203 “undeliverable” bounce-back messages. A reminder survey email was sent on March 1, 2024.

Table 13.2: Survey 1 email dataset.

RELIGIOUS TRADITION	NUMBER OF DATASET EMAIL ADDRESSES
Mainline Protestant: American Baptist Churches, Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Friends General Conference, Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church	713
Evangelical Protestant: Adventist, Assemblies of God, Church of God, Church of the Brethren, Church of the Nazarene, Evangelical Free Church of America, Free Methodist Church, Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, Mennonite, Pentecostal, Presbyterian Church in America, Reformed, and Southern Baptist	406
Unknown—from list of churches (ExpertGPS, 2024) with duplicate email addresses removed).	375
Catholic	323
Orthodox Christian	17
Buddhist	12
Muslim	12
Jewish	8
Hindu	6
Mormon	0 (none publicly available)

To complete the survey, respondents had to indicate that they had not previously completed the survey, were at least 19 years of age, and were either the most senior appointed/ordained leader in their local religious community completed if the respondent answered all required questions. A total of 99 surveys were completed for a 6% response rate among the 1,579 deliverable email addresses (Table 13.3).

Table 13.3: Survey 1 responses.

RELIGIOUS TRADITION	NUMBER OF COMPLETED SURVEYS
Mainline Protestant)	51
Evangelical Protestant	22
Catholic	14
Other	10
Buddhist	1
Muslim	1
Total	99

A content analysis (Guest, 2023; Reid et al., 2017) did not yield findings that are statistically representative of Nebraska’s religious leaders. However, this analysis reveals important patterns related to faith and climate change in Nebraska’s faith communities and highlights differences among them.

Survey 2: 2024 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey

To complement Survey 1 of religious leaders, Survey 2 (Table 13.4) was sent to individuals who do not serve as leaders of local religious communities. It is possible but unlikely that a limited number of respondents were such leaders. For that reason, this chapter refers to Survey 2 respondents as “laity.”

This study used the 2024 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS 2024), a biannual survey that represents Nebraskan’s views and experiences (Bureau of Sociological Research, 2019). The Bureau of Sociological Research (BOSR) at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln conducted this survey, which included core demographic questions and additional questions submitted by researchers, including seven specifically used in this chapter.

The NASIS 2024 survey was distributed through the mail to a representative sample of 10,000 Nebraska

households between July 12, 2024, and October 25, 2024. In total, 2,232 surveys were completed, 902 of which were filled out online (via a link in the letter) and 1,330 via mail-in, resulting in a response rate of 23.2%.

This chapter analyzes the 1,004 respondents who identified as Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Mormon/Latter-day Saints, nothing in particular, or other. It focuses on those who reported attending religious services several times a week, once a week, nearly every week, or about once a month. Respondents who reported attending religious services several times a year, less than once a year, never, or did not indicate frequency of religious service attendance were excluded from this analysis. The chapter excludes the respondents who identified as Atheist or Agnostic, and those who did not answer the question about religious identity.

Instead of Mainline or Evangelical, the NASIS survey asked Protestant respondents to identify as either “Not Evangelical or born again” or “Evangelical or born again.” This chapter will present “Not Evangelical or Born Again” as Mainline and “Evangelical or Born Again” as Evangelical to facilitate readers’ comparison of tables from Survey 1 and Survey 2.

Table 13.4. Survey 2 responses from those who attend religious services several times a week, once a week, nearly every week, or about once a month.

RELIGIOUS TRADITION	NUMBER OF COMPLETED SURVEYS
Mainline Protestant	312
Evangelical Protestant	313
Catholic	299
Other	53
Nothing in particular	14
Mormon/Latter-day Saints	7
Jewish	4
Muslim	2
Total	1,004

Although the NASIS survey is representative of all Nebraskans, the findings are not statistically representative of religious believers since the survey did not oversample for religious identity. However, as with Survey 1, the findings expose notable patterns of how Nebraskans from different traditions experience climate change engagement in their local religious communities.

Quantitative findings¹⁹

Belief in climate change

Only about half of survey respondents believe in human-caused climate change (Figures 13.1 and 13.2). For Mainline Protestants and Catholics, local religious community leaders were more likely than laity to believe in human-caused climate change.

Survey 2 revealed sharp disparities along political party lines (Figure 13.3). In total and across all denominations, Republicans were significantly less likely than Democrats to believe in human-caused climate change.

These findings are unsurprising and mirror national trends. In the U.S., political identity and ideology are the strongest predictors of a person's stance on human-caused climate change (Hornsey et al., 2016; Kahan et al., 2012; Leiserowitz et al., 2018). Republicans and conservatives are more skeptical of human-caused climate change and less supportive of action to address its reality (Funk and Hefferon, 2019). This is often true even when one's religious tradition explicitly challenges partisan skepticism and hostility toward human-caused climate change.

For example, after Pope Francis published his 2015 ecological encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which emphasized that human-caused climate change is an urgent moral issue based on 25 years of Catholic teaching (Pope Francis, 2015), research demonstrated that in the U.S., many "conservative Catholics devalued the Pope's credibility on climate change" rather than reconsider the climate change stance of their party (N. Li et al., 2016, p. 367). Given that nearly half of Nebraska voters are registered Republicans, it is not surprising that local religious leaders in Nebraska

showed relatively weak responses to human-caused climate change (Independent Voter Project, 2023), as shown in Figure 13.3. This is especially true since 88% of Christians in Nebraska are Republican or lean Republican (Pew Research Center, 2014b).

Leaders speaking about climate change

In both studies, roughly half of respondents said that at least one of their local religious community leaders has never spoken publicly to their people in the past 10 years about the importance of climate action (Figures 13.4 and 13.5). In total and among both Mainline Protestants and Catholics, leaders reported lower percentages of "never" than laity. Additionally, Mainline Protestant leaders reported higher percentages of "often" and "sometimes" than Mainline Protestant laity. These patterns could be because leaders recalled giving at least one public address on climate change while the laity either did not hear their own leader do so or missed a time when they did due to less than weekly service attendance.

Leaders speaking about climate change policies

In both studies, at least half of respondents indicated that their local religious community leader has never spoken publicly in the past 10 years about the importance of public policies to address climate change (Figures 13.6 and 13.7). Both Mainline Protestant and Catholic leaders reported lower percentages of "never" than the laity. Additionally, Mainline Protestant leaders reported a higher percentage of "often" and "sometimes" than Mainline Protestants. These patterns could arise because religious leaders recall giving at least one public address on climate change policy. At the same time, members of the laity might not have heard it or could have missed it due to attending services less than weekly.

Relatedly, the Nebraska Catholic Conference did not prioritize climate change between 2017 and 2025 (Nebraska Catholic Conference, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d, 2025).

¹⁹Percentages may sum to 100% +/- 1 due to rounding. Full survey questions and results can be found in Appendix B.

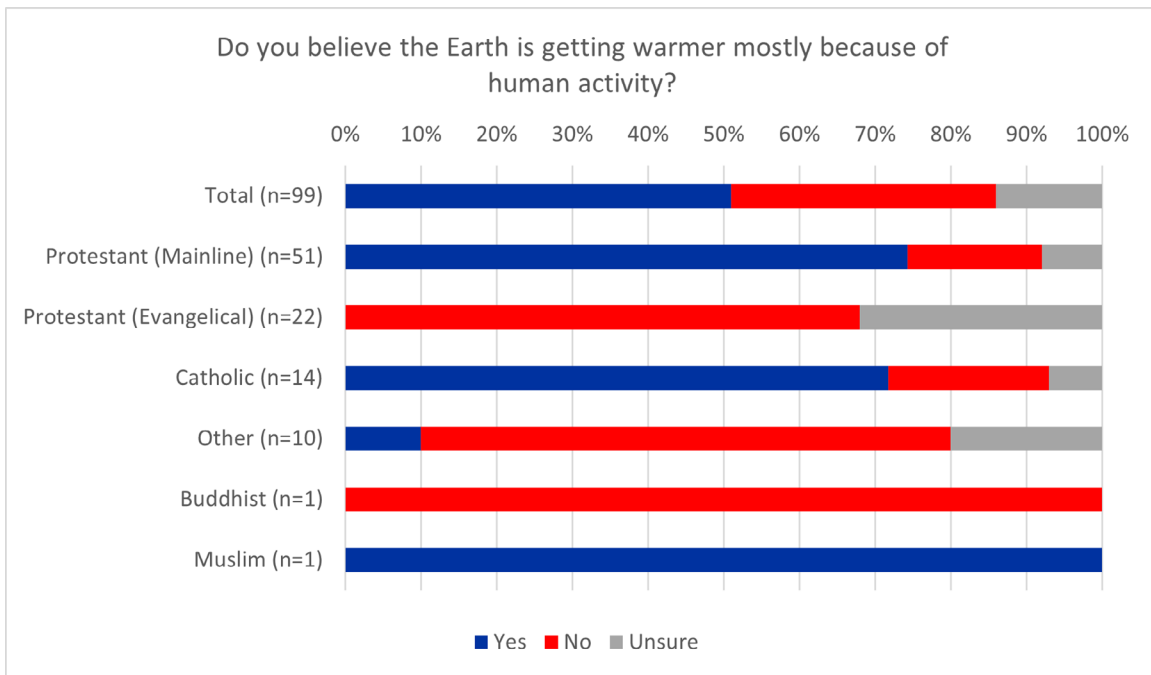


Figure 13.1. Responses from religious leaders, survey 1.

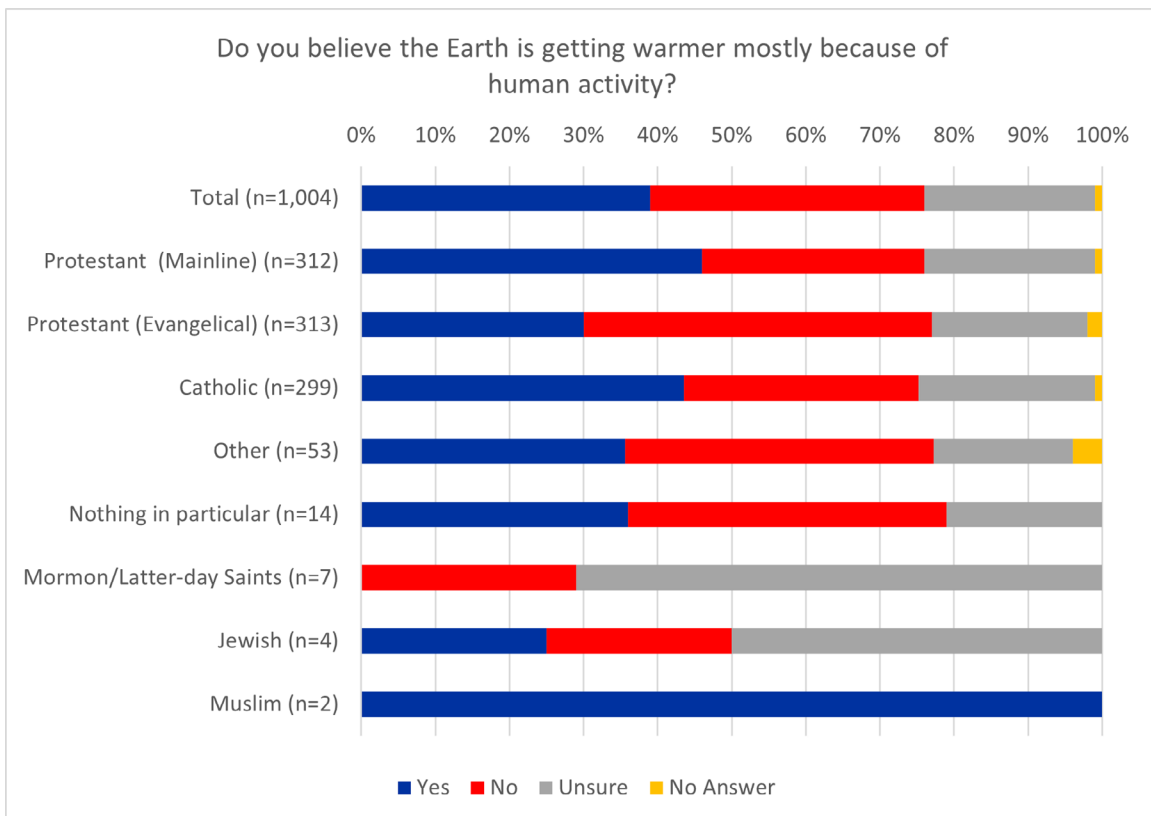


Figure 13.2. Laity, survey 2.

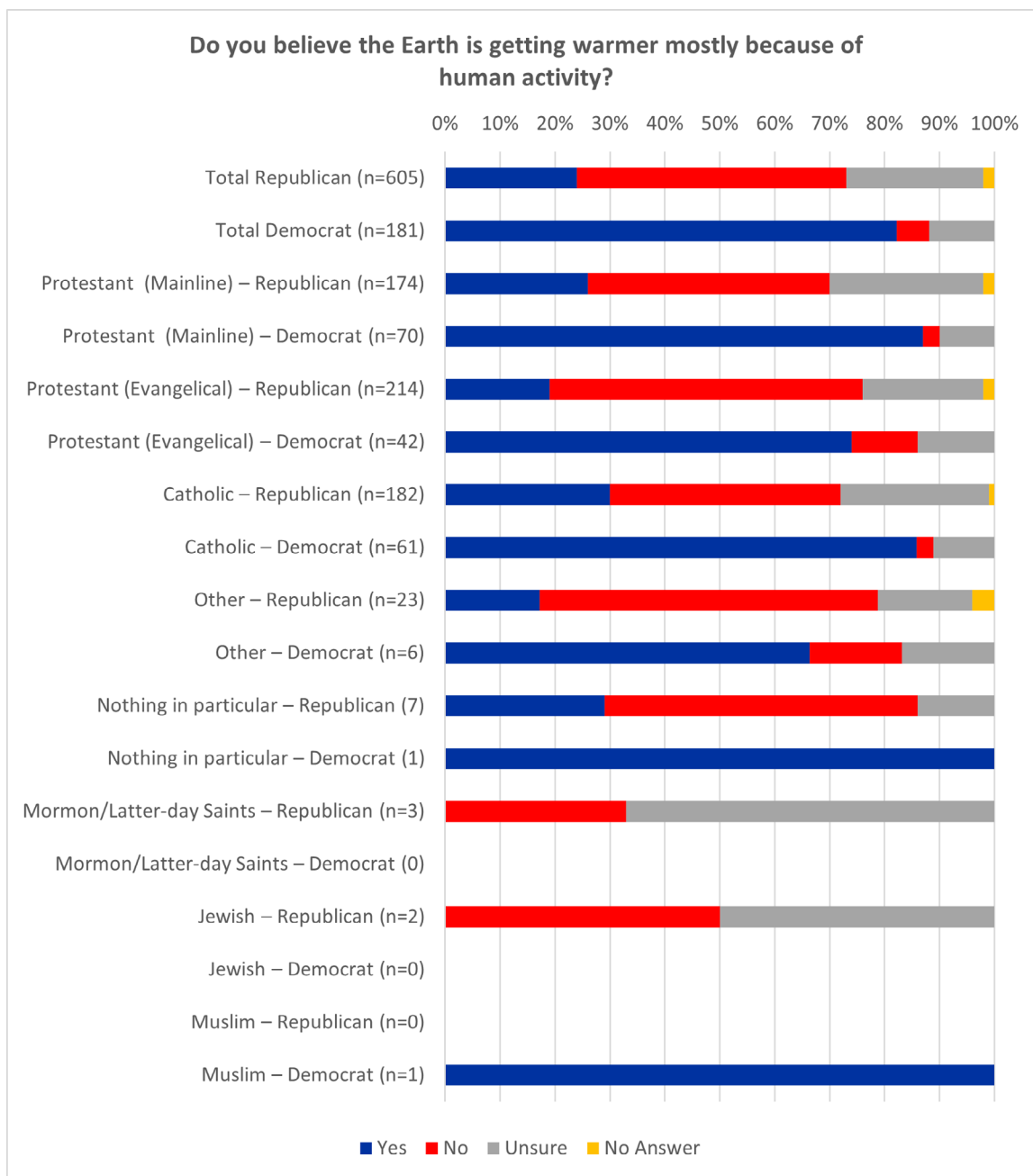


Figure 13.3 Laity, survey 2.

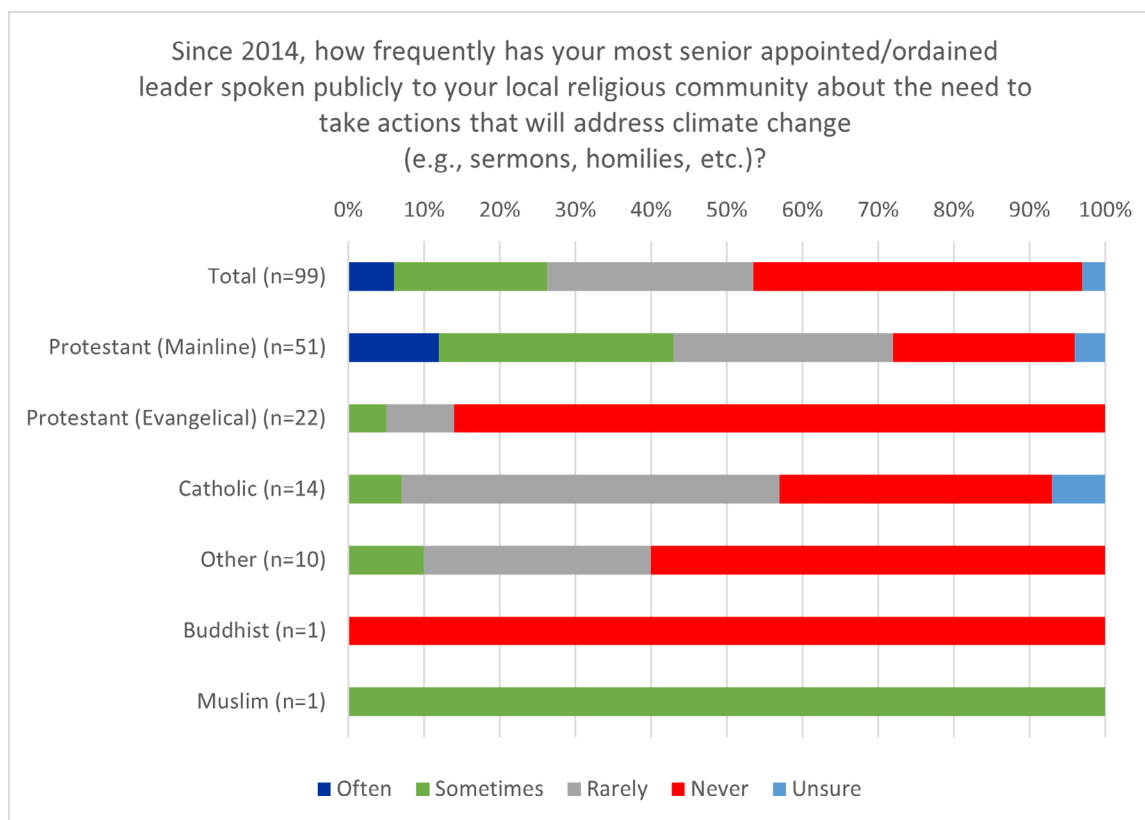


Figure 13.4: Religious Leaders, survey 1.

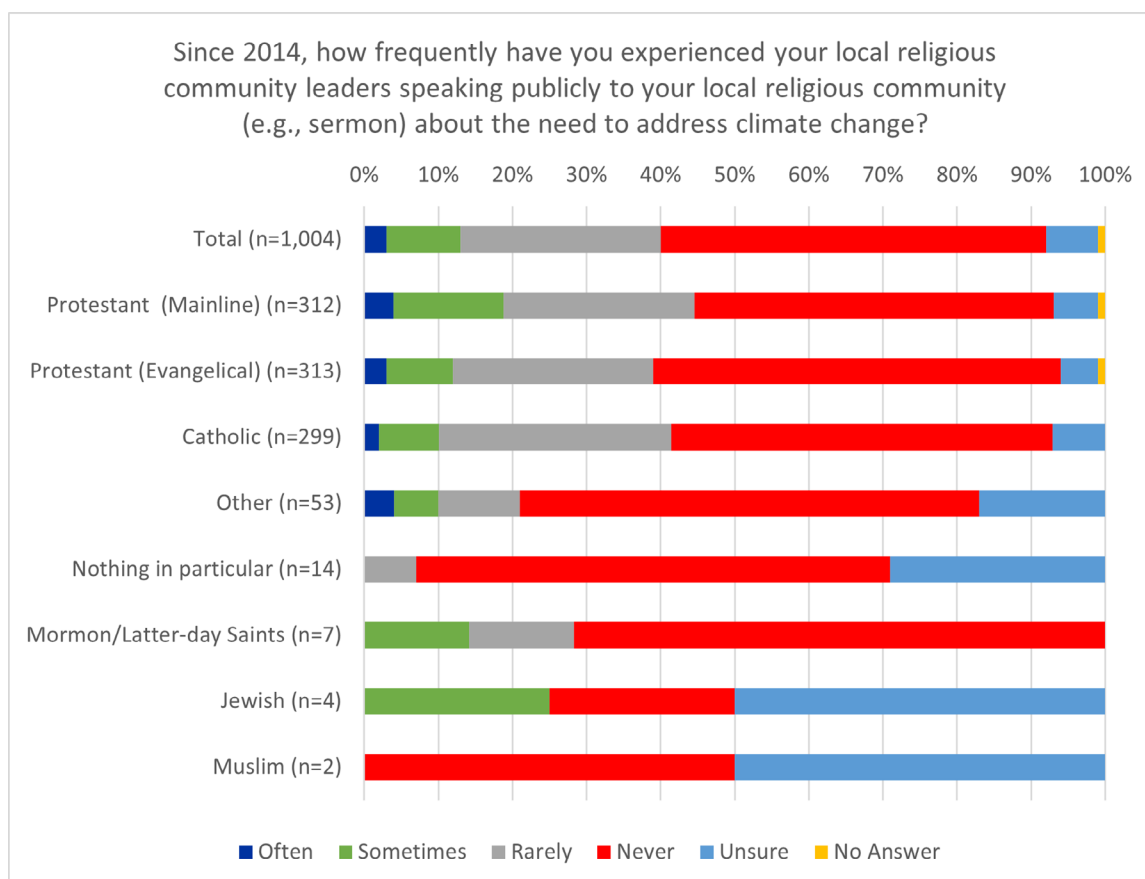


Figure 13.5: Laity, survey 2.

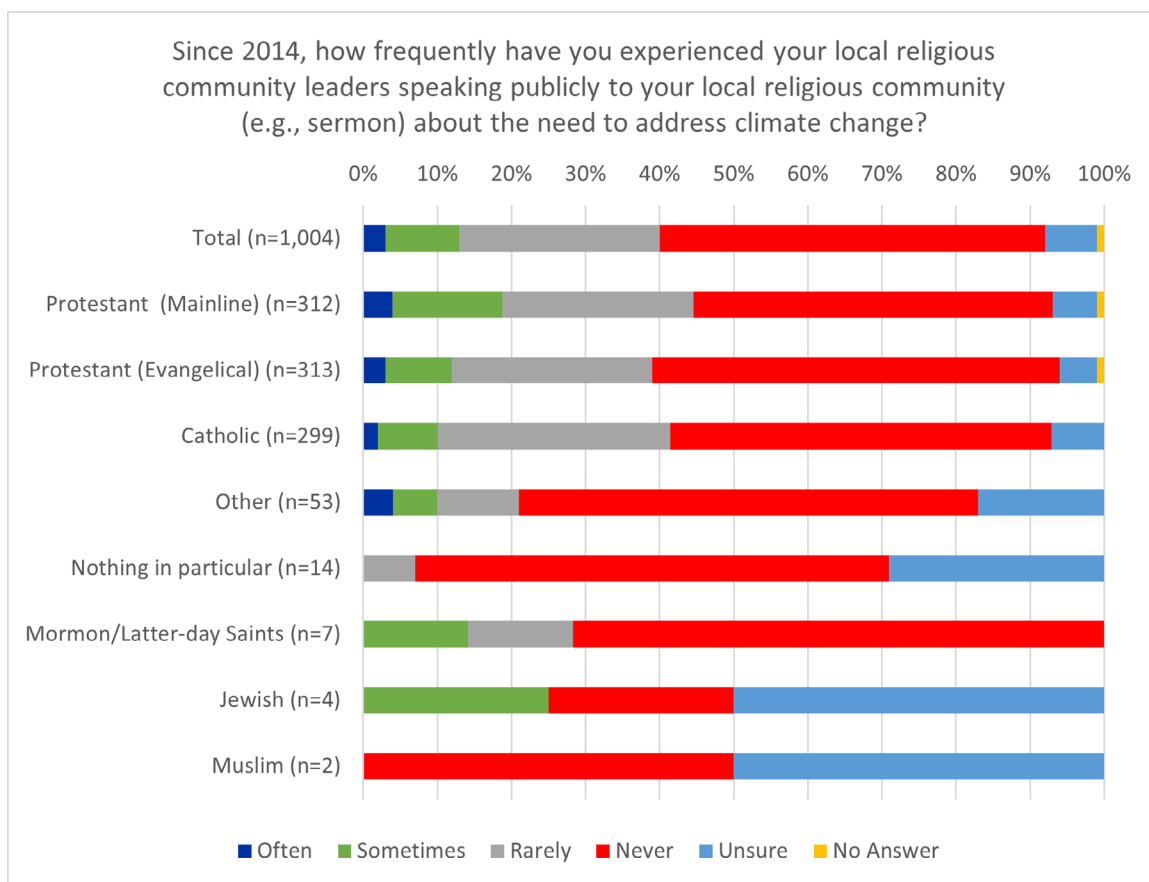


Figure 13.6. Religious leaders, survey 1.

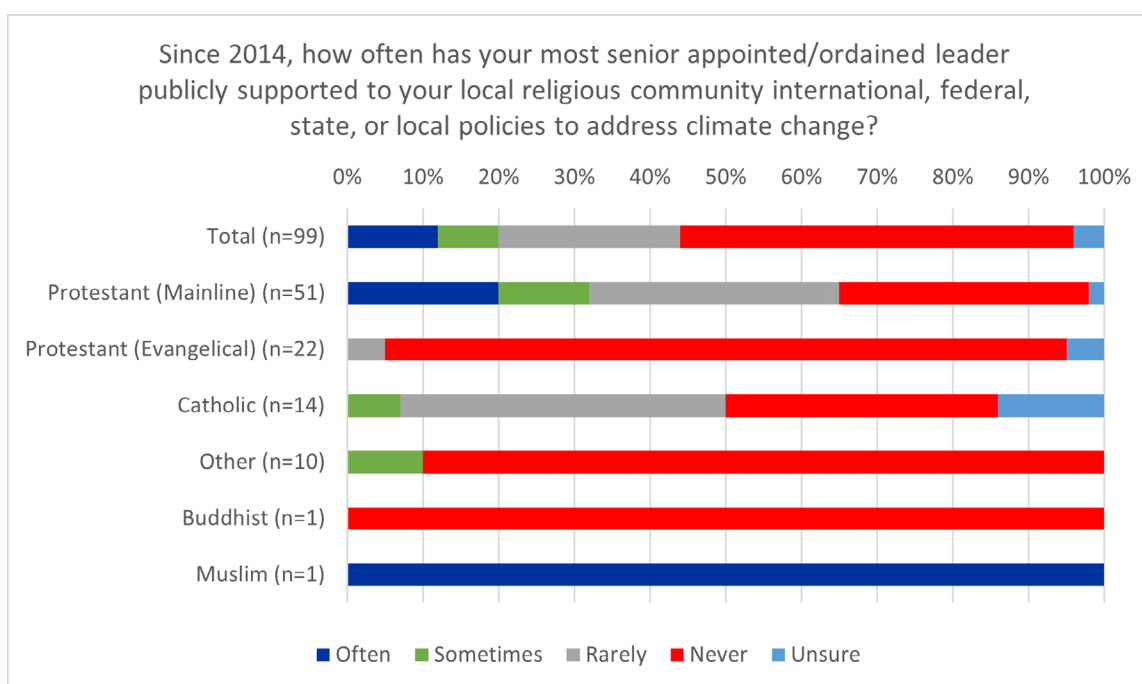


Figure 13.7. Laity, survey 2.

The Catholic Church is divided into geographic regions called dioceses, and each is led by a bishop. In the U.S., 45 states and the District of Columbia have a Catholic conference that advocates for public policies at the state level. These conferences represent all the dioceses in a state and act “at the direction of that state’s bishops,” providing unique, unified official advocacy on behalf of a religious denomination (National Association of State Catholic Conference Directors, 2024).

The mission of the Nebraska Catholic Conference is to “advocate for the public policy priorities of the Catholic Church” in Nebraska. It represents the state’s three dioceses—Omaha, Lincoln, and Grand Island—and acts at the direction of Nebraska’s three Catholic bishops (Nebraska Catholic Conference, 2024a).

For Nebraska’s 109th Legislature (2025–2026), the Nebraska Catholic Conference identified five areas of advocacy and 16 priority issues (Nebraska Catholic Conference, 2025). As of February 2, 2025, these were publicly available on the NCC website. Neither climate change specifically nor anything related to the environment broadly are listed.

- » **Life and Human Dignity:** Advancing the right to life of the unborn, supporting pregnant women and mothers, defending religious liberty, and promoting a true and person-centered bioethics.
- » **Marriage, Family, and Human Sexuality:** Upholding the sanctity of marriage and family life, protecting the rights of parents and children, and affirming a healthy vision of human sexuality.
- » **Education:** Supporting Catholics schools, furthering school choice, and developing just education policies for students and staff.
- » **Social and Human Development:** Promoting economic justice, advancing restorative justice, welcoming immigrants and refugees, and combatting human trafficking.
- » **Church as Institution:** Strengthening the Church’s place and role in society to evangelize the Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and undertake the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

For Nebraska’s 108th Legislature (2023–2024), the Nebraska Catholic Conference identified four areas of advocacy and 23 priority issues (Nebraska

Catholic Conference, 2024a). As of December 1, 2024, this information was publicly available on the NCC website. Neither climate change specifically nor any environmental issues were included in these priorities:

- » **Life and Human Dignity:** Right to life of the unborn, pregnancy resources, bioethics, end of life issues, human trafficking, religious liberty.
- » **Education:** School choice, matters impacting Catholic schools, NSAA regulations, federal education issues.
- » **Marriage and Family:** Marriage, children’s issues, human sexuality, adoption, foster care.
- » **Social and Human Development:** Public assistance programs, housing, economic justice, just wage, human trafficking, immigration, restorative justice, predatory lending.

Before this, the areas and issues identified as legislative priorities by the Nebraska Catholic Conference remained consistent, covering the 107th (2021–2022), 106th (2019–2020), and 105th (2017–2018) Legislatures. This means that for nearly a decade, approximately 23% of Nebraska adults who identify as Catholic, which amounts to more than 300,000 people, have never heard climate change prioritized by their state conference.

These facts also suggest that the Nebraska Catholic Conference has not prioritized climate change in its direct advocacy efforts. This is confirmed by the positions taken on various bills and resolutions in the 105th to 108th Legislatures, as the Nebraska Catholic Conference does not list any action on any of the 14 introduced bills or resolutions related to climate change or renewable energy:

- » 108th Legislature (2023–2024): LB255, LB399, and LB1370
- » 107th Legislature (2021–2022): LB228, LB266, LB483, and LR102
- » 106th Legislature (2019–2020): LB23, LB155, LB283, and LB704
- » 105th Legislature (2017–2018): LB625, LB646, and LR46

This lack of action has occurred despite the Catholic Church’s overt calls for environmental advocacy. As Pope Benedict XVI asserted, “*The Church has a*

responsibility towards creation, and she considers it her duty to exercise that responsibility in public life, in order to protect earth, water and air as gifts of God the Creator meant for everyone, and above all to save mankind from the danger of self-destruction” (2010, emphasis in original). Lack of NCC climate advocacy also stands in contrast to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), which represents the bishops nationally and has repeatedly advocated on climate change (2024). For example, the USCCB has declared that “decarbonization of the economy—through the replacement of fossil fuels with secure, reliable, affordable, and clean energy—is the preeminent environmental challenge faced by all nations” (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2023).

Prayer about climate change

In both studies, nearly half of respondents said their local religious community has never prayed together about climate change in the past 10 years (Figures 13.8 and 13.9). Among respondents from both Protestant (Mainline/not Evangelical or born again) and Catholic backgrounds, those in Survey 1 (religious leaders) reported lower percentages of “never” than those in Survey 2 (the laity). Additionally, Mainline Protestant and Evangelical Protestant leaders reported higher percentages of “often” and “sometimes” compared to Mainline Protestant and Evangelical Protestant respondents.

As before, these patterns could be because the leaders recalled communally praying about climate change at least once while the laity either did not hear their community do so or missed a time when they did due to less than weekly service attendance.

Education about climate change

In both studies, roughly half of respondents said their local religious community has not incorporated climate change into religious education in the past 10 years (Figures 13.10 and 13.11). For all but Muslim respondents, the percentages of the laity who were unsure about their community’s education efforts were higher among laity (Survey 2) than religious leaders (Survey 1). This is likely because leaders were generally more familiar than laity with the educational offerings of local religious communities.

Comprehensive science-based emissions reduction targets

In both studies, most respondents indicated that their local religious community has not committed to a comprehensive greenhouse gas reduction target of net zero carbon or zero greenhouse gas emissions (Figures 13.12 and 13.13). Overall, across all denominations, a larger percentage of laity reported being unsure about their community’s commitments (Survey 2) compared to religious leaders (Survey 1). As with previous questions, this discrepancy is likely because leaders were generally more familiar with the master planning of local religious communities than the laity.

Actions to reduce emissions

In addition to not committing to a comprehensive, science-based emissions reduction target, more than half of survey respondents said their local religious community has not taken any new actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from their operations (Figures 13.14 and 13.15). Again, across all denominations, a greater percentage of laity expressed uncertainty about their community’s actions (Survey 2) when compared to religious leaders (Survey 1). As with previous questions, this discrepancy likely stems from leaders being more familiar with the operational aspects of local religious communities than the laity.

In summary, religious leaders and laity indicated that attention to climate change in local religious communities across Nebraska is vastly incommensurate with religious traditions’ emphasis on this issue and their opportunity to help society address it.

Qualitative findings

Survey 1 revealed a wide range of beliefs and attitudes about climate change among the leaders of local religious communities. Many respondents believe the climate has changed due to human activities, while others do not believe in climate change or do not attribute it to human activity. In addition, some respondents were unsure whether climate change has occurred or could not identify its cause.

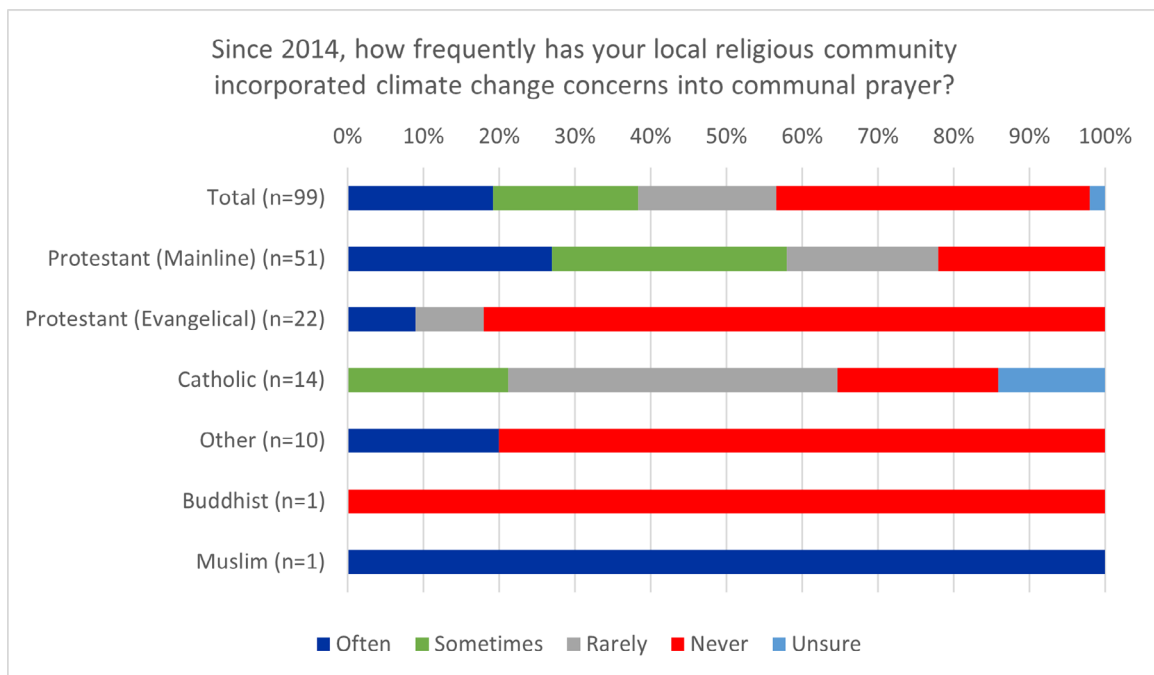


Figure 13.8. Religious leaders, survey 1.

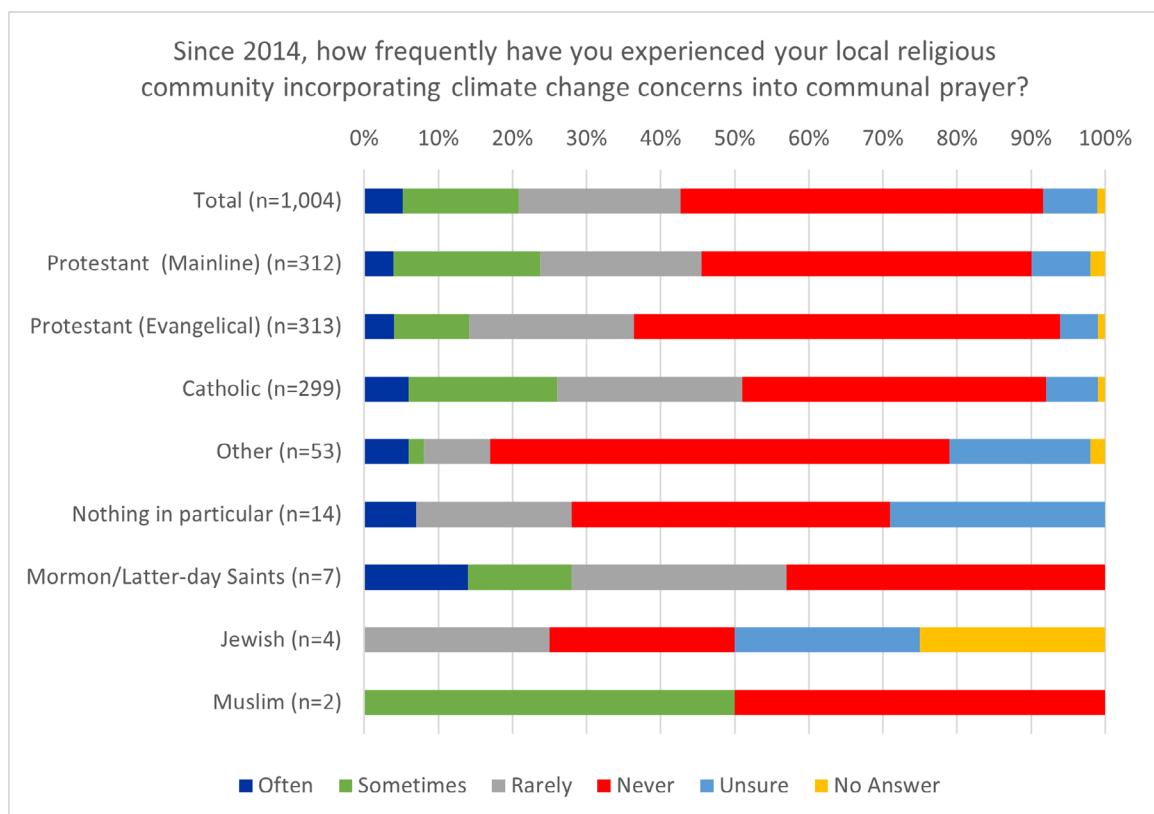


Figure 13.9. Laity, survey 2.

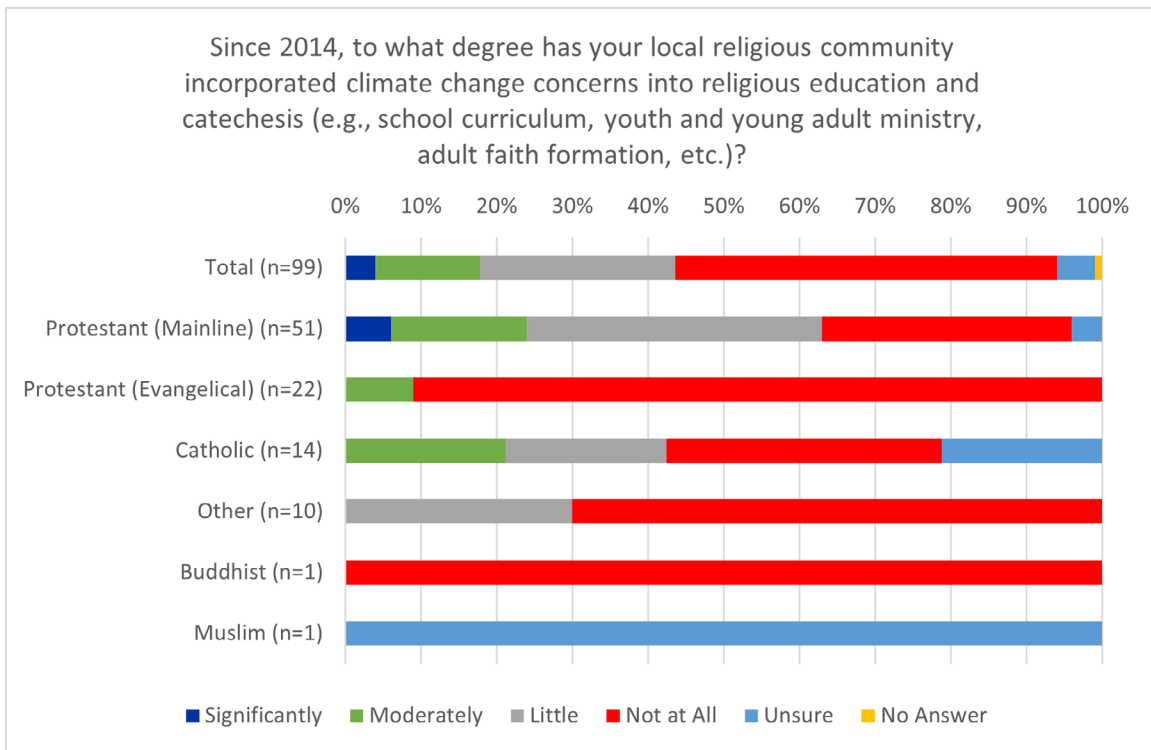


Figure 13.10. Religious leaders, survey 1.

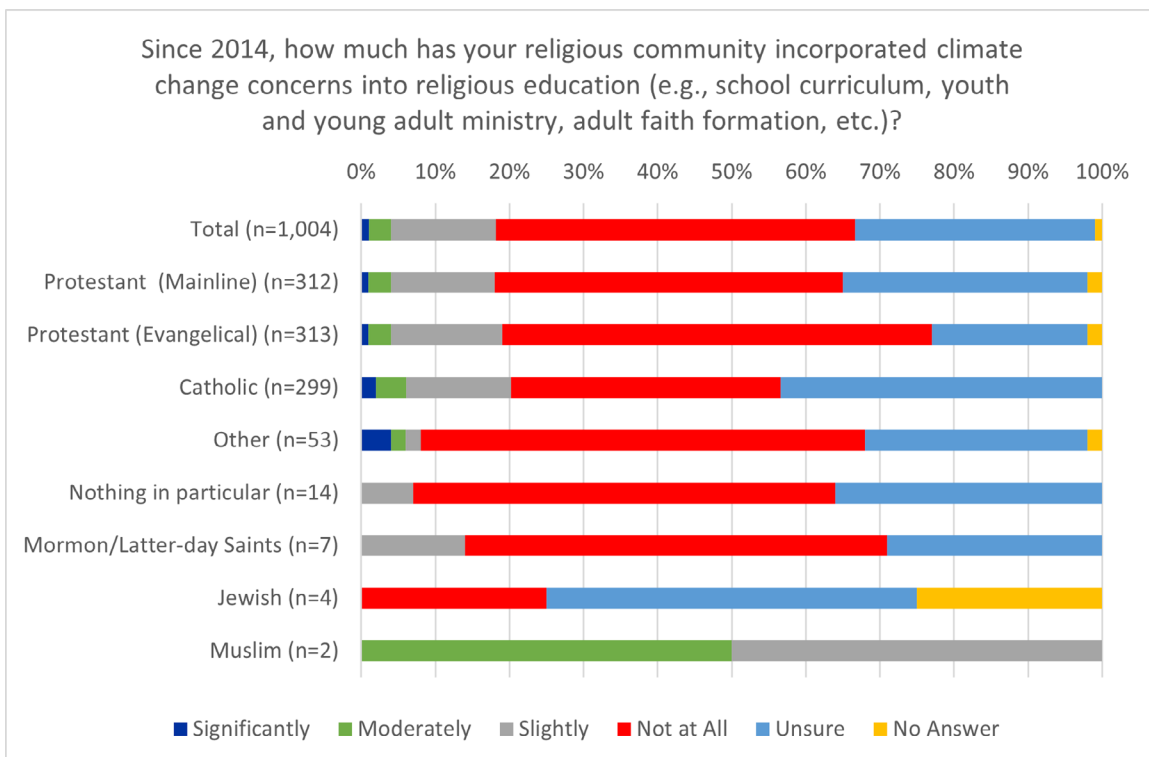


Figure 13.11. Laity, survey 2.

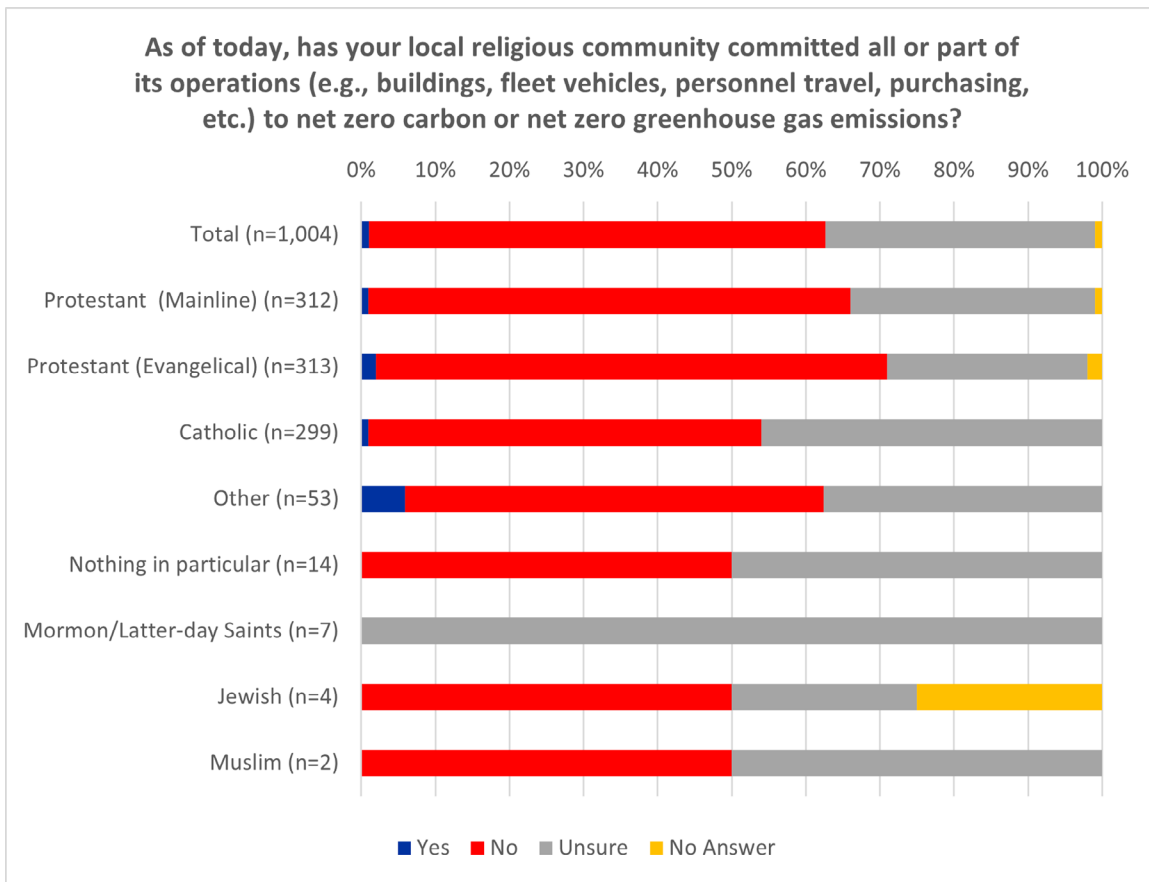


Figure 13.12. Religious leaders, survey 1.

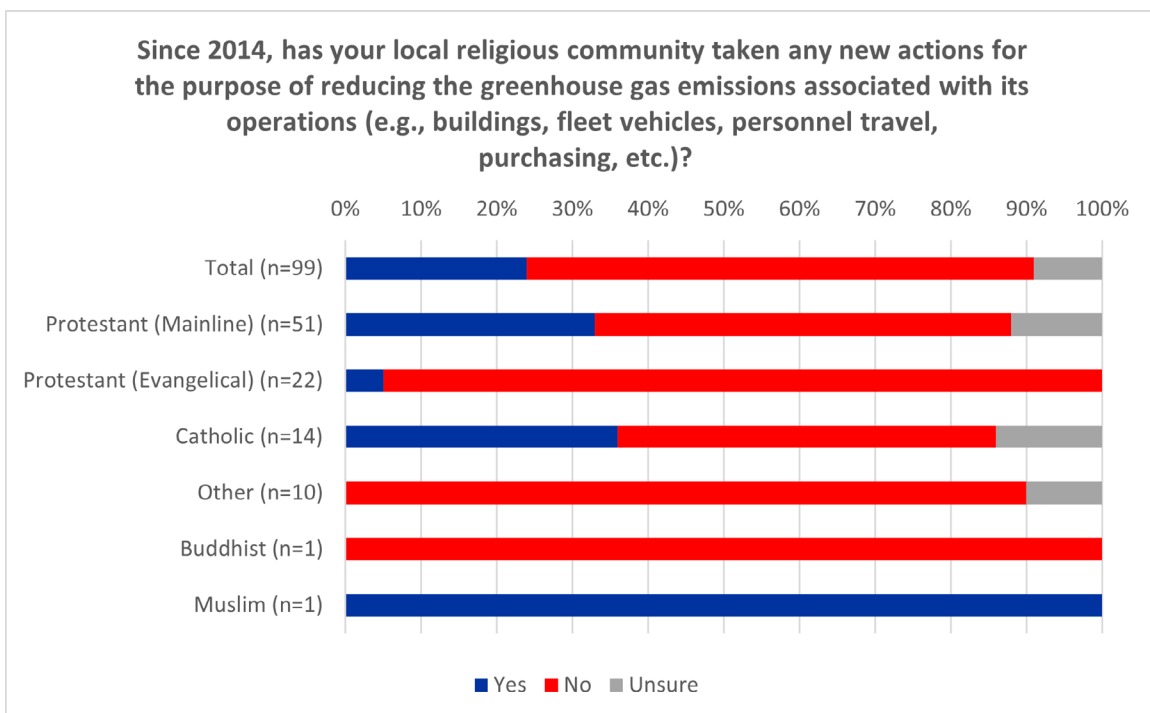


Figure 13.13. Laity, survey 2.

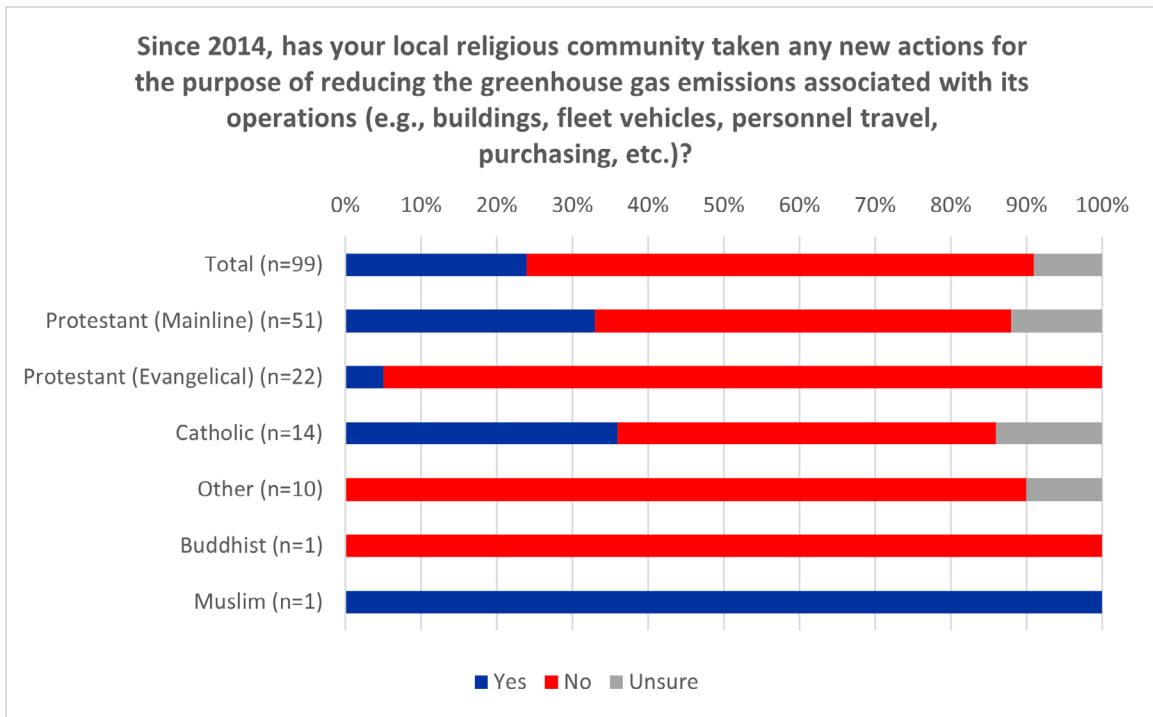


Figure 13.14. Religious leaders, survey 2.

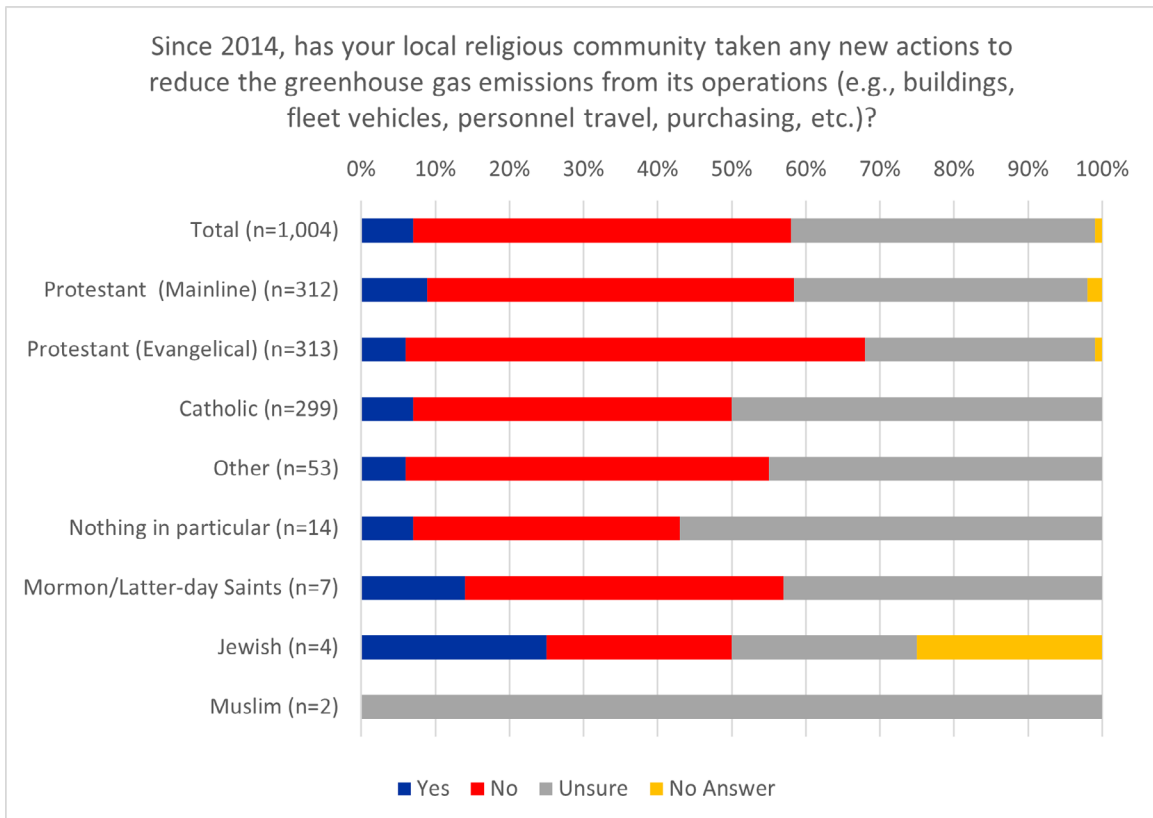


Figure 13.15. Laity, survey 2.

No specific faith tradition held a single perspective on this topic. In most cases, this survey revealed a variety of viewpoints from each faith tradition. Individuals from differing faith backgrounds often expressed similar opinions, citing shared values or barriers to taking action. As a result, the survey findings will be organized based on belief about human-caused climate change rather than religious affiliation.

Religious leaders who do not believe in climate change

As noted, 35% of respondents do not believe in human-caused climate change. Across religious traditions, many of these respondents did not incorporate climate change discussions into religious activities, such as education, prayer, or teaching. Those who reported not including climate change in teaching and education often disagree with published scientific data and cited doubts about the methods or credibility of climate scientists. This sentiment was often paired with the belief that climate change is politically motivated or too controversial for discussion within their religious community. Some respondents felt religious communities should not be engaged in political matters despite many religious leaders' faith-based advocacy for climate policies (Wells, 2023).

Unsurprisingly, some respondents who do not believe in human-caused climate change did not identify climate change as an important issue. Many emphasized that their theology does not align with their perceptions of movements focused on mitigating climate change. Some Christian organizations appeared to prioritize messages of salvation that are disconnected from present ecological concerns or only teach about topics that they believe are explicitly discussed in the Bible.

Others cited the Bible to argue that humans should not focus on addressing climate change because God, not human activity, controls the climate. These rationales contributed to a lack of congregational action, which is also influenced by additional reasons. For example, some respondents viewed climate solutions as impractical, especially in rural communities with limited infrastructure to support options like electric vehicles. Others noted perceived financial barriers to implementing more energy-efficient operations.

Religious leaders who are unsure about climate change

Many respondents who were uncertain about the reality of climate change share sentiments with those who do not believe in anthropogenic climate change. However, some individuals in this group still included climate change in their communal prayers and took steps to lower their carbon footprint.

Leaders who were unsure about human-caused climate change rarely included this topic in their education or teaching. They cited many of the same concerns as those who deny human-caused climate change. A few respondents in this category mentioned that they lacked sufficient information on this topic to adequately include it in their educational offerings.

Some undecided leaders incorporated climate change into their communal prayers due to the increasing visibility of extreme weather in their communities. In addition, one Protestant leader noted that they include this topic in their prayer because the resource they use for liturgical activity addresses climate change.

Individuals in this category cited a lack of resources and interest in the topic as reasons for not taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Few respondents cited disbelief as a barrier to action. Many noted that they did not have the financial means to switch to energy-efficient solutions. Others expressed skepticism about the significance of their emissions contributions or reductions.

Although this group of leaders did not firmly believe in climate change, many still took steps to reduce their emissions. These individuals often cited personal financial incentives, such as lower utility costs, as motivation. Some also mentioned the influence of their local religious community in motivating changes. One individual noted that they were inspired by the biblical call to care for creation.

Religious leaders who believe in climate change

Of the 51 religious leaders who believe in human-caused climate change, many incorporated discussions about

it into religious activities and took steps to mitigate their contributions to global warming. Individuals across various religious traditions commonly cited stewardship as a motivating factor for their actions. One Muslim respondent expressed a sense of responsibility to care for the environment. Protestant respondents similarly expressed a commitment to caring for creation. Some respondents wanted to achieve justice for communities disproportionately affected by climate change.

In contrast to the respondents who do not believe in human-caused climate change, those who believe highlighted climate research as a factor in shaping their perspectives. Additionally, they recognized the impact of extreme weather events and often use communal prayers to cope with grief from these incidents. In some cases, the inclination to include climate change in prayer and education came from higher religious authorities, such as national or regional religious leaders. In many cases, the desire for action arose organically from the congregation.

Many faith communities whose leaders believe in human-caused climate change have made substantial efforts to reduce their emissions. Active members of these communities often played an important role in facilitating climate discussion and promoting action, particularly in communities with fewer resources. Common activities included installing energy-efficient heating and cooling systems or lighting fixtures, recycling and composting, and efforts to reduce consumption or purchase locally sourced supplies.

Despite these isolated activities, no responding community has made a comprehensive operational commitment to a science-based greenhouse gas emission reduction target, such as achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2030. This was particularly noteworthy since, as noted above, many higher religious authorities to whom local leaders report have explicitly called for comprehensive science-based climate action.

While the desire to take climate change action was considerable, these communities still face barriers. Respondents expressed financial restraints in market pricing and internal budgeting, limiting their access to climate solutions. Others felt unsure of where to begin, expressing a need for an educational framework to guide them. Some newer leaders hesitated to discuss

climate change with their congregations, recognizing that it can be contentious. Although they believe in climate change, they felt they lacked the platform to discuss it with their local religious communities.

Discussion

Both surveys showed weak religious responses to climate change across Nebraska. These findings are unsurprising for at least two reasons. First, they align with national patterns of religion and climate change. For example, Evangelical Protestants in the U.S. and those who responded to both surveys are less likely to believe in human-caused climate change than Mainline Protestants or Catholics (Pew Research Center, 2022; PRRI Staff, 2023).

Additionally, the silence on climate change among Mainline Protestant leaders is evident nationally and in Nebraska. According to the Pew Research Center (2022), 35% of U.S. Mainline Protestants report not hearing climate change discussions in pastor sermons. In Nebraska, 24% of Mainline Protestant respondents from Survey 1 (religious leaders) indicated that their most senior appointed/ordained local religious community leader never speaks publicly to their congregation about climate change (Figure 13.4). Additionally, 49% of Nebraska Mainline Protestant respondents to Survey 2 reported the same (Figure 13.5).

A similar pattern of silence exists among Catholics. Nationally, 41% of U.S. Catholics report that they do not hear homilies about climate change (Pew Research Center, 2022, p. 60). In Nebraska, 36% of Catholic respondents to Survey 1 (religious leaders) noted that their most senior appointed/ordained local religious community leader never speaks publicly to their congregation about climate change (Figure 13.4). Additionally, 51% of Catholic respondents to Survey 2 (the laity) reported that their most senior appointed/ordained local religious community leader never speaks publicly to their congregation about climate change (Figure 13.5).

Since partisan identity appears to trump religious tradition on climate change for some believers, unlocking the potential of religions in Nebraska to

address human-caused climate change will likely require efforts to separate morality from partisanship in climate change discussions. This is echoed by U.S. Catholic bishops in their landmark climate change teaching *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good* (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2001), which states

At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It is about the future of God's creation and the one human family. It is about protecting both "the human environment" and the natural environment. It is about our human stewardship of God's creation and our responsibility to those who come after us.

One potential pathway forward is for religious communities to access federal climate mitigation funding through the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). As the International Energy Agency summarizes,

The IRA includes a combination of grants, loans, tax provisions, and other incentives to accelerate the deployment of clean energy, clean vehicles, clean buildings, and clean manufacturing. This includes investments in deploying clean energy, expanding the electricity grid, developing domestic clean technology manufacturing, incentivizing uptake of electric vehicles, reducing methane emissions, increasing the efficiency of buildings, improving the climate resilience of communities, and other areas. In total, around 370 billion USD will be disbursed for measures dedicated to improving energy security and accelerating clean energy transitions. (IEA, 2024)

The 2025 One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), signed by President Trump, severely restricted and eliminated IRA clean energy funding (H.R.1 - 119th Congress, 2025). Nebraska's congressional delegation unanimously supported the Bill. Before OBBBA, religious communities used the IRA to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions while saving money on energy costs. As noted above, Horizons Community United Methodist Church in Lincoln installed solar panels with a \$21,600 IRA federal tax credit and a grant from Nebraska Interfaith Power and Light (Israel, 2024).

Many religious traditions had published resources on accessing IRA funding (Catholic Climate Covenant, 2024; Episcopal Church, 2024; Tavcar, 2023; United Church of Christ, 2022; United Methodist Creation Justice Movement, 2023). The ecumenical Interfaith Power and Light (2024) also published guides to IRA funding, and Nebraska Interfaith Power and Light could assist local religious communities, as it did for Horizons Community United Methodist Church in Lincoln (Israel, 2024).

Although IRA funding is deeply curtailed, ONE RED remains a potential clean energy and efficiency opportunity for state religious communities (NDEE, 2024d). In 2024, the Nebraska Department of Water, Energy, and Environment received a \$307 million Climate Pollution Reduction Implementation Grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to support this initiative. As of August 2025, the grant appeared solvent despite efforts to cancel billions of dollars from other EPA grants (NDEE, 2024d). If it remains, religious communities could apply to two ONE RED programs: the Non-Residential Energy Efficiency Program (\$30 million, which funds up to 50% of project costs) and the Non-Residential Solar Program (\$28 million, which funds up to 60% of project costs).

However religious communities discern funding climate change mitigation, doing so will likely require a shift toward what the Vatican calls "ecological economics" that incorporate social and environmental costs of action and inaction into financial assessments (Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, 2025). As Pope Benedict XVI (2010) summarizes,

It is not hard to see that environmental degradation is often due to the lack of far-sighted official policies or to the pursuit of myopic economic interests, which then, tragically, become a serious threat to creation. To combat this phenomenon, economic activity needs to consider the fact that "every economic decision has a moral consequence" and thus show increased respect for the environment. When making use of natural resources, we should be concerned for their protection and consider the cost entailed—environmentally and socially—as an essential part of the overall expenses incurred.