

Finding Flourishing

Navigating the Barriers, Strategies, and Opportunities for
Christian Climate Action and Advocacy in Canada



Kylah Lohnes

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and Community Development (MTSD)

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**FOR THE LOVE
OF CREATION**

Introduction

This research draws on a survey and interviews to uncover some of the key barriers, strategies, and opportunities for Christians in Canada to engage in climate action and advocacy. The research was conducted both for my summative exercise in Wycliffe College's Master of Theological Studies in Urban and Community Development program, and to support the work of *For the Love of Creation* (FLC), at the request of FLC's Coordinating Committee. I have been involved with FLC since May 2020, primarily as a member of the Local Engagement Sub-group and the Working Group.

The primary research took the form of an online survey and Zoom interviews. The survey was completed between mid-December 2021 and mid-January 2022. The interviews were completed in February 2022. 64 people were invited to complete the survey and 18 people were invited to interviews. In total, 27 people completed the survey and nine people participated in interviews. Participants were selected based on their experience leading climate action and/or advocacy in Christian settings. The participants covered a range of provinces and denominational affiliations.

There are important limitations on this study, particularly due to the small sample size. The results of this research are not intended to be representative of the entire Christian community in Canada, nor of the denominations of research participants, nor of all member organizations and individuals within FLC. Furthermore, participants were invited based on their experience leading other Christians in Canada in climate action or advocacy. While the questions attempted to differentiate between personal experience and their perception of other people's experiences, this distinction cannot be made clearly in all their answers.

This research engages with leaders whose work intersects with the work of FLC to provide a "bottom-up" look at the challenges and opportunities they face. Therefore, the themes presented in this paper should offer a starting point for conversation about what tools, resources and approaches are required at this moment to engage more Christians in Canada in climate action and advocacy. The findings should be paired with greater conversation among all stakeholders, including non-Christian spiritual and religious groups, as well as ongoing engagement with broader research both within and outside of Canadian faith communities.

The results presented below are a condensed version of a longer research paper. Therefore, this presentation of the results does not consider all the nuances of the research or its findings. A summary of the findings and brief quotations from research participants are used here to offer a broad overview of each category. To learn more about the nuances, contradictions, and connections, as well as how these results compare to academic and civil society literature, please read the longer research paper. A copy of this paper can be obtained in the FLC Google Drive or by emailing flc.pac@gmail.com

Results

Both broad Canadian research studies and this small research study revealed that more Canadians are becoming aware of and concerned about climate change. In the survey, 92.3% of respondents indicated that at least half of those in their faith communities were "concerned" about climate change when concerned was defined as "thinking that human-caused global warming is happening, is a serious threat, and support climate policies". Furthermore, eight out of nine interviewees mentioned seeing an increase in concern about climate change in their context. One interviewee commented that "there's a growing sense in the church that we can do more, more action". Another said, "I feel like, and I hope this is true, I feel like there's a growing consciousness about creation care and ecological justice in Christian communities".

"there is movement across the board in people looking at the flooding and the wildfires and things like that. There's just no viable way to lead from any position of fighting against climate action."

Interviewee from Saskatchewan

Barriers

Lack of Leadership



Translating Knowledge into Meaningful Action



Feelings: Grief, Anxiety, Apathy, Overwhelmed



Comfortable with or Benefitting from the Status Quo



Detached From Creation



Too Many Other Priorities



Barriers

Lack of Leadership (Political and Faith-Based)

Of all the barriers presented in the survey, the highest ranked barrier was that “the government, industry, or other institutions need to take the lead on climate change.” One survey participant commented that there is a “disconnect between climate commitments during elections and discerning ways to continue engaging governments in implementation of climate commitments.”

Six interviewees made reference to a lack of faith-based leadership. Interviewees said that they would like to see more faith leaders integrating “the climate crisis in their sermons, homilies ... talking about it in catechism or in youth group” or joining climate marches.

Translating Knowledge into Meaningful Action

In total, five interviewees and six survey participants made direct references to people not knowing what actions to take. Some of this is related to a lack of technical knowledge about climate change. However, more often participants related it to a lack of knowing the best ways to act on climate change. One survey participant summarized this barrier as “assumptions in some quarters that they are already ‘doing their bit’ through small lifestyle choices”. As one interviewee put it, “there’s still a lot of sentiment that this is simple if we would all just do the right thing – and by that they tend to mean recycling – then everything would be fine”.

Feelings: Grief, Anxiety, Apathy, Overwhelmed

Five survey participants and six interviewees made references to eco-grief or eco-anxiety. When given space to comment on the social or emotional barriers that they have encountered, survey participants mentioned things such as “paralyzing despair” and “climate chaos is a fear-inducing topic”. Research participants also described knowing people, or themselves, who are overwhelmed at times. One interviewee said that “it’s really a big issue ... it’s quite daunting ... what can we do?”. “Our actions seem useless or insignificant compared to the challenges of climate change” was the second highest rated barrier in the survey. This highlights another facet of being overwhelmed, which is akin to hopelessness.

Comfortable With or Benefitting from the Status Quo

Six interviewees made comments referring to wealth and comfort as barriers because they keep us buffered from the impacts of climate change. Four survey participants commented that economics, affluence, and convenience are barriers to climate action. One interviewee said, “I’m afraid just from my own observations that a lot of people are still too comfortable, and they want a level of comfort in their life that is contradictory with some of the more drastic measures we might need to take”. Another commented that “in a culture which provides such ample, constant, and perennial benefits and comforts, it’s hard for them to sense the experience of others who do not enjoy access to such privileges ... a lot of us, and I’ll include myself in this, use our wealth as a buffer against adversity or uncertainty”.

Detached From Creation (Emotionally and Spiritually)

Feeling detached from creation was mentioned by five interviewees. One said that we often think of the earth as “not us. We’re not the earth, earth is everything else ... we don’t see ourselves as part of earth, we see earth as kind of a stage, and we come on it and do our thing”.

A spiritual detachment was characterized in terms of the scope of salvation (focused only on humans). This spiritual barrier was mentioned by five interviewees and two survey participants. One interviewee said that “people have that narrow gospel, that God saved people and we have a personal relationship with God. I agree with that, but we tend to narrow it down to he saved us. He’s got a bible for us. Dogs and cattle don’t read the Bible, so it’s for us”.

Too Many Other Priorities

The third highest ranked barrier in the survey was “other issues (social, political, economic, etc.) take priority over climate change”. Four survey participants reiterated this barrier in their comments and five interviewees also highlighted this barrier. When asked what holds others back from climate action, one interviewee simply said “life. Busyness. Their own stresses in life”. Three survey participants and one interviewee commented that COVID-19 was taking priority over climate action.

Research participants also commented that other social justice issues took priority for some members of their faith communities. A survey participant said that people tend to be “overwhelmed by more localized or personalized issues (i.e. racism, food insecurity, employment, mental health etc.)”. One interviewee clearly explained that “there are other causes that people are more readily drawn to where they see actual people needing help close at hand. I think there’s a feeling that yeah, it would be nice to work on climate change, but there’s refugees right here that need our help or homeless people”.

Strategies & Opportunities

Collaboration and Networking

Although research participants were able to highlight examples of collaboration and networking already taking place, including *For the Love of Creation*, they also called for more of this work. Five survey participants and five interviewees called for more networking and collaboration. Research participants highlighted the practical and emotional support that networking provides. One survey participant said, “I would like to see support for community-wide or regional initiatives, to get us out of the insular view of what one particular congregation can do”. Another survey participant commented that “movements for change demand a supportive community. People perceive themselves as individuals acting along rather than a part of a community working together for change”. Networking and collaboration can help overcome some of the barriers listed above, particularly around difficult emotions and uncertainty about what to do.

Stronger Local Leadership

Since a lack of leadership was identified as a barrier, it is not surprising that research participants called for stronger local leadership, particularly within faith communities. In total three survey participants and six interviewees called for more church leadership. One survey participant said that we need “senior leadership keeping attentive of this. Clergy keeping clear about the relationship between ecological care and the gospel”. One Catholic interviewee highlighted the disconnection between local community members or leaders and the bishops. They said, “I have often heard Catholic religious community leaders say ‘well, we’re doing it, but the bishops are not following’ or ‘we’re really making that effort but there’s no clear priority on environmental issues from the bishops of Canada’”.

Additionally, four survey participants and two interviewees were able to highlight examples of how strong local leadership facilitated more engaged climate action in their context. One interviewee reflected on their work pastoring a congregation and increasing the congregation’s engagement with the Season of Creation. They said that they saw “huge increase in interest, more evidence of changing patterns of behavior, especially with regard to commerce, purchasing, travel, food, engagement with local issues, signing petitions, reading books.”

Connect with Creation

Creating space to connect with creation may help to address the barriers of feeling detached from creation and of being comfortable with the status quo. 10 survey participants selected “land-based learning or experiences” as an engagement strategy which helped facilitate a shift from passive concern to engaged action in their faith communities. Additionally,

Strategies & Opportunities

Collaboration & Networking



Stronger Local Leadership



Connect with Creation



Acknowledge & Express Emotions



Learn from Indigenous People



Connect with Other Values & Justice Issues



four interviewees and one survey participant made direct comments about people needing to spend more time outside. One interviewee reflected that “one of the ways that people have coped with COVID restrictions has been by connecting more with nature and I think that might end up catalyzing some shift because, you know, the more you connect with nature the more you feel that love and that need for protection. That might inspire some more folks to really start thinking about the way we are in the world”.

Integrating creation into spiritual practices, including hosting worship services outdoors, was another strategy highlighted by research participants. One interviewee talked about “going out on the forest for pilgrimage type walks and celebrations of the Eucharist in the woods”. Another interviewee commented that churches “need to experiment with what happens when they say, ‘we’re church and we’re church outside’”.

Acknowledging and Expressing Emotions

As described above, feelings such as grief, anxiety, hopelessness and being overwhelmed prevent some people from engaging in climate action and advocacy. Some of the same research participants who described these challenges also offered possible strategies for engaging these difficult emotions. Five interviewees and two survey participants offered such strategies. One survey participant said that their faith community needs “youth counselling which takes the reality of the crisis seriously”. One interviewee reflected that “there is going to be an enormous need for pastoral care around that. I don’t think the church is anywhere near ready for that”. Both of these comments highlight the need for pastors and faith leaders to be prepared to support those experiencing difficult emotions related to climate change.

Biblical models of lament and prophecy can be helpful tools for navigating difficult emotions. Reflecting on the shift from passive concern to engaged action in their context, one survey participant commented that “it has started with lament for some people”. Biblical lament offers a model for expressing our grief, anxiety, sorrow, and anger before God. The examples of the Biblical prophets provide a model for mixing tragedy and hope. The same interviewee who reflected that the church is not adequately prepared to offer pastoral care also called on the church to “talk about the unreasonable hope that sings through a lot of Scripture as applying to this terrifying crisis that we’re in”. In this interviewee’s reflections fear and hope co-exist. Those experiencing difficult emotions can be offered space to reflect on and express those emotions while also being reminded of the hope that exists so that they do not become paralyzed by their emotions.

Learn from Indigenous People

Another opportunity highlighted by research participants was learning from Indigenous people. 13 survey participants said that “learning about Indigenous worldview” was a helpful engagement strategy. When asked about helpful terminology, 11 survey participants included references to Indigenous nations/worldviews. The importance of learning from Indigenous teachings was also highlighted by five interviewees. One interviewee said that learning about Indigenous spirituality is “helpful to us changing our worldview and making sure that we’re really through our faith honouring our common home”. Another reflected that “Indigenous communities really have shown incredible leadership around climate justice issues and connecting that with Indigenous rights which you know just makes so much sense, it really is a new and interesting way of shifting perspectives”. A third interviewee called for Settlers to “not necessarily duplicate but learn

from the Indigenous relationship with land”. Learning from Indigenous people and integrating Indigenous values and worldview into climate action has been a helpful strategy for many research participants and should be continued and deepened.

Connect Climate Action with Other Values and Justice Issues

The final strategy offered by research participants is to connect climate action with other values that people already care about, particularly with other justice issues with which churches are already engaged. Five interviewees and three survey participants talked about ways that climate action could be more connected to other social justice issues. One interviewee who has been involved in starting local cooperatives said, “I have always contended that you cannot address environmental issues without also addressing the social and economic. And the cooperative model is the best model I know of in the world for that”. This statement connects climate justice to economic issues. Other interviewees connected climate justice to issues such as human health, climate refugees, and Indigenous rights.

Research participants also connected climate action with broader spiritual values. Three interviewees and two survey participants commented that climate action should be more explicitly connected with spirituality. One survey participant called for more “theological education that is relatable to the public, different age groups; including short articles for newsletters [and] committee reflections”. When asked about the role of the church in climate action, one interviewee said, “I think, in a way, the church does call us to think beyond ourselves. There are many notions in the Christian faith around sacrifice and offering oneself which is where that faith is really turned towards our neighbour, towards the other, and towards something bigger than ourselves. I don’t know if we put that forward enough”. Making these explicit connections between spirituality, Scriptural themes, and climate action offers is one strategy for engaging those in faith communities who do not currently consider climate action as a possible part of their spiritual life.

Other Themes

The 12 themes highlighted above are by no means an exhaustive list of barriers, strategies and opportunities raised by the research participants. They are merely the list of themes highlighted most frequently. Other themes described less frequently such as financial barriers, interpersonal conflict, peer-to-peer engagement, and positive framing, are discussed in the full version of this paper.

“What does [climate change] mean in terms of transformation for us in our earth-view, God-view, human-view, community-view, our view of our past and our view of our future? What are the calls to radical rearrangement?”

Interviewee from Alberta

Another important theme is the unique role that a faith-based network such as *For the Love of Creation* can play in the climate movement in Canada. As a network of networks and a faith-based organization, FLC can make unique contributions to climate action by paying attention to the spiritual and social side of this crisis. While a focus on advocacy and climate action is important, one interviewee challenged this focus saying that it’s “vulnerable to exactly the experience that I’ve been through where you keep on working towards the hoped-for thing and you just don’t provide for the losses along the way”. This interviewee encouraged a more intentional focus on self-care and reconnecting with spiritual practices such as lament and reconciliation with other people and with creation. Another interviewee called for a more intentional grounding in faith, saying that “we get consumed with these practical

ideas, forgetting that we probably don’t know the solution or the place we want to end up yet. We need someone to help us along the road, you know? And so, that would be the thing that makes us unique ... we’re not so good in the environmental work, probably, of clinging to or explaining our relationships, our foundations in faith”.

These interviewees and others also urged a grounding in the social and spiritual realities of the climate crisis, including paying attention to the emotions and disconnection previously highlighted. One interviewee said that we need to come together and realize “the kind of care we have to take of each other and the kind of meditations and prayers and getting out into an area where we can be with nature and the care we have to take. I think that we certainly would be looking to care for each of us that way too, in a prayerful way too”. Here again, we see a call to integrate spirituality and social gathering to face the reality of climate change.

One challenge to focusing on the spiritual and social side of the climate crisis, is that it seems to detract time and energy from the practical work of action and advocacy. Given that climate change is framed as a crisis which we have a limited time to address, legitimate questions may be raised about whether or not we can afford to spend time and resources on things which may not directly reduce carbon emissions. However, the perspectives just offered encourage me to raise another question. That is, given that there are real and widespread social and spiritual barriers to climate action, is it possible to achieve the required targets without taking the time and energy to invest in social and spiritual action and healing? This research does not offer a definitive answer to either of the questions just raised but does urge climate practitioners to pay attention to both. One of the many tensions of climate action and advocacy comes from the reality of human experiences and systems which do not operate purely on logic or science, but involve complex emotions, beliefs, relationships, and experiences.

Conclusion

The relationship between the various barriers, strategies, and opportunities offered above is complex and non-linear. While there may be a direct link between some of the barriers and strategies offered above, others have no direct one-to-one link. Some of the barriers have no direct strategies offered to overcome them and some of the strategies may be useful in addressing multiple barriers. Furthermore, some of the barriers and strategies seem to be co-dependent. For example, we may speculate on the extent to which a lack of leadership contributes to some people feeling uncertain about how to translate concern into action. Indeed, there was overlap in participants who mentioned each of these barriers. A linear or one-to-one relationship between the barriers and opportunities, or between barriers themselves and opportunities themselves, should not be forced. Rather, these findings offer a set of various starting points for reflection of the realities of climate action and advocacy in the contexts of the research participants. Reflecting on these findings may provide numerous starting points for actions, resources, and relationships, all of which may create space for fruitful engagement in climate action and advocacy in the diverse contexts of Christians in Canada.

As previously mentioned, this research cannot be considered an adequate representation of Christians in Canada or even of Christians within the *For the Love of Creation* network. Therefore, I cannot offer a definitive set of next steps or action points for FLC. Rather than attempting to do so, I offer these findings as a place for those within FLC to begin reflecting on past, present, and future work.

The findings of this project reveal that while there are many important barriers to be addressed, there are also strategies and opportunities to support this process. In fact, some of these strategies and opportunities are already within the expertise of the FLC network. Research participants highlighted stories and resources that are already making a difference on the ground. This is cause for celebration and hope. While climate change and the barriers to climate action may seem overwhelming, all is not lost. The findings presented above reveal that while some strategies need to be amplified and multiplied, new strategies must also be adopted. The process of discerning the way forward will require attentive listening to Creator, to creation, and to one another. It will require making use of each one's skills, experience, and knowledge as we come from our diverse contexts into a unified network of communities seeking to love creation well for our mutual flourishing now and for the next seven generations.

