

Practical report on the project «Are Religions becoming Green ARG»¹

- Study investigating the role of religion in addressing ecological problems such as climate change
- 30 interviews with representatives of religious congregations (21) and umbrella organizations (9)
- Interviews were partially based on the NCIS survey of religious congregations across Switzerland
- Strong commitment in the area of materialization, with energy efficiency measures implemented and the use of green energy, including installation of renewable energy (solar PV and heat pumps).
- Materialization may have increased through certification schemes such as Grüner Guggel and EcoEglise.
- Dissemination and encouragement of environmental behaviour via religious sermons is not explicit most of the time.
- Campaigning is approached very cautiously, and largely avoided owing to a perceived risk of conflict.

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What was the research question of the study?

We aimed to answer 3 research questions:

(a) to what extent local religious communities (“congregations”) in Switzerland are committed to environmental goals?

(b) What forms of environmental commitment take place.

(c) what factors influence religious environmental commitment.

Religious communities have influential resources to address ecological problems such as climate change. They can advocate for progressive climate policies (campaigning), carry out projects to improve their own carbon footprint (e.g., energy-efficient renovations) (materialization), and promote environmentally friendly behavior among their members (dissemination). However, it is unclear to what extent religious communities in Switzerland (and elsewhere) are committed to ecological issues, and what the barriers are to such commitment.

How did we investigate these questions?

To investigate these questions, we conducted **30 semi-structured interviews** in Switzerland. **21 of them with representatives from religious congregations and 9 with representatives from umbrella organizations**. The interviews covered representatives of both the Catholic and the Reformed churches. The interviews were based on the assumption that religious communities are able to engage in sustainable change in three different ways:

- **Campaigning:** e.g., through press releases, participation in activities and events which are run by environmental groups such as Fridays for Future
- **Materialization:** e.g., the installation of solar panels and energy efficiency improvements
- **Dissemination:** e.g., through sermons or religious classes with an environmental focus.

The interviews were carried out in both the French and the German-speaking parts of Switzerland, both in person (18/29) and via zoom (11/29), and were then transcribed and coded in MAXQDA. Interview questions were designed to supplement quantitative research which was delayed owing to the COVID pandemic. These interviews thus helped to test the survey questions, and aid in interpreting and framing the survey results. However, the interviews ultimately took on the role of an exploratory study which produced important results of its own.

Results

A. Levels of commitment

Although there was a clear commitment to environmental engagement and this was seen as an important issue for all the communities interviewed, engagement was diverse and there was a perception in some interviews that this was still inadequate in the face of increasingly visible climate change (e.g., interviews 1 and 18). There was also a perception that environmental engagement is a process which fluctuates and changes over time and is very location specific- thus, awareness was perceived as increasing in the French speaking cantons, but was perceived as largely dependent on individual commitment, with individuals acting as change agents that provide impetus for new measures (e.g., interview 6).

B. Forms of engagement

Engagement was divided into materialization, dissemination and campaigning.

In terms of **materialization**, most congregations interviewed had invested in renewable energy or had concrete plans to do so, with 2 heat pumps installed (interviews 2 and 13), and 6 PV panel installations (Interviews 5, 8, 10, 16, 17, 18) with 2 further installations planned (interviews 9,19).

In terms of **campaigning**, interviews pointed to the importance of specialized umbrella organizations such as Oeku which help to spearhead public campaigns including the campaign in favour of the Climate Protection Act which was passed in June 2023. Furthermore, campaigns such as the “Goodbye Morteratsch Glacier” where a ceremony took place in May 2023 were also supported by umbrella organizations. Interview partners from congregations and umbrella organizations which took less of a role in public campaigning noted that they do not feel that this was the role of the church (Interviews 6 and 7), e.g.:

“What is the Church doing in ecology? We have nothing to do with it.” (interview 6)

Notable tension was also perceived when dealing with local issues vs. global issues (such as climate change) which is exacerbated by a sense that religious institutions need to remain neutral in what is seen to be as a political issue (interviews 2,12,20):

“...you shouldn't get so politically involved” (Interview 20)

In terms of dissemination, a number of interview partners reported that environmental themes are explored in some religious sermons but this was not explicit most of the time. However, when asked about certification in order for congregations to become either Eco-église or Grüner Guggel, there were a number of concerns. There was however a perception amongst some congregations that this would involve significant added work, and cost:

“At the moment it's a lot of money” (Interview 1)

“...fear... it's too much work” (Interview 3)

C. Influencing factors

Multiple influencing factors were identified through the interviews, which acted as both barriers and facilitators to environmental engagement (sometimes both simultaneously).

1. Covid (Interviews 5, 13, 19, 21). The pandemic had a major effect in reducing environmental engagement with drops in church activities corresponding to decreased engagement.
2. Resources: A “question of time and money” (e.g. interviews 1, 12, 17, 18 19, U2). Multiple interview partners noted that both time and money were limited and that these were significant barriers to increasing engagement. Despite the fact that campaigning and dissemination do not normally entail huge costs, they do often entail what was perceived to be a significant added workload.
3. Financial incentives (interviews 4, 9). A lack of financial incentives was perceived as a reason for limited engagement, particularly in the area of materialization. The provision of added funds for environmental engagement could play a significant role in increasing the speed and scope of religious environmental engagement.
4. In order to deal with added workloads, some congregations rely on the use of volunteers (for non-environmental work too). This was seen as problematic (interviews 1, 5) as volunteers were perceived of as having their own agendas which are sometimes in direct conflict with environmental engagement.

5. Building ownership. Difficulties in materialization projects were sometimes connected to building ownership, with rental buildings harder to address (interview u6). Furthermore, issues with building regulations, particularly with heritage buildings, hampered installation of PV panels.
6. The role of specialist umbrella organizations was largely perceived as positive, particularly with eco-certification schemes, despite some indication that this is not unproblematic.
7. Congregational size. There may be a need to consider increasing support for smaller congregations which receive less funding (interview 1). Indeed, some interview partners pointed to the need for church finances to be divided differently in order to encourage congregations to become more committed to environmental engagement (Interview 5).
8. Perceptions. The need to remain “neutral” was seen as important (interview 4, U2) with a perception that the environment is political issue. As the effects of climate change become more visible, mitigatory processes may change from being perceived as political to become perceived as societal issues which transcend politics.

Conclusions

Engagement takes a myriad of forms and is defined differently by different religious organizations. With this in mind, many congregations note the importance of meeting members needs and accommodating different desires for engagement (or non-engagement). Engagement may also be met with resistance from some members, and the risk of pushback may limit action. Despite this, there is significant potential for greater engagement from religious organisations- sustainability stakeholders may wish to consider the need to better interact with religious organisations to increase and magnify their reach.

Although currently religious organizations are laggards rather than pioneers in environmental engagement, there are indications that religious environmental engagement is increasing and that the potential for greater environmental engagement is recognized by many religious organizations.

Who carried out the project?

The research project was conducted at the **Center for Religion, Economics and Politics** at the University of Basel.

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