

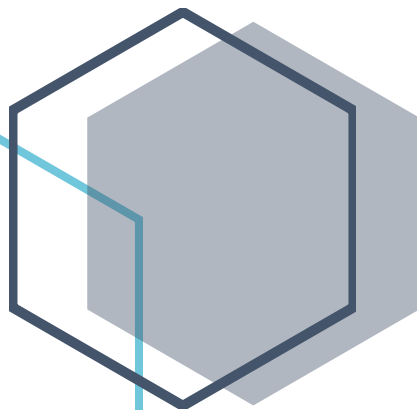


Above Reproach

A study of the ordination practices
of Southern Baptist churches

An overseer must be above reproach...

1 Timothy 3:2





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This saying is trustworthy: "If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work." ²An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³not an excessive drinker, not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy. ⁴He must manage his own household competently and have his children under control with all dignity. ⁵(If anyone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of God's church?) ⁶He must not be a new convert, or he might become conceited and incur the same condemnation as the devil. ⁷Furthermore, he must have a good reputation among outsiders, so that he does not fall into disgrace and the devil's trap.

1 Timothy 3:1-7 (CSB)

⁸Deacons, likewise, should be worthy of respect, not hypocritical, not drinking a lot of wine, not greedy for money, ⁹holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰They must also be tested first; if they prove blameless, then they can serve as deacons. ¹¹Wives, too, must be worthy of respect, not slanderers, self-controlled, faithful in everything. ¹²Deacons are to be husbands of one wife, managing their children and their own households competently. ¹³For those who have served well as deacons acquire a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 (CSB)

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, a close friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

²As they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off.

Acts 13:1-3 (CSB)

There is no standard process or policy concerning ordination in the SBC. The SBC is not a church; as such, it neither ordains nor "recognizes" ordination. Both initial ordination and recognition of previous ordination are addressed strictly on a local church level. Every cooperating Southern Baptist church is autonomous and decides individually whether or not to ordain an individual, or whether to require ordination of its pastor or ministry staff.

When a church senses that God has led a person into pastoral ministry, it is a common practice to have a council (usually of pastors) review his testimony of salvation, his pastoral calling from the Lord, and his qualifications (including theological preparation and scriptural qualifications according to 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:7–9) for pastoral ministry. Based upon that interview the church typically decides whether or not ordination would be appropriate. Some cooperating churches may require seminary training from an SBC seminary prior to ordination, while others may not; such a requirement is entirely up to the church. Of course, every cooperating church is free to approach ordination in the manner it deems best.¹

SBC.net

¹ <http://www.sbc.net/faqs.asp>

INTRODUCTION

Background

Southern Baptists, we have a problem.

Actually, we have multiple problems brought to light by a recent investigation by *The Houston Chronicle*², which uncovered a horrific litany of sexual abuse among Southern Baptist churches, with more than 700 victims over the past twenty years and more than 250 offenders since 2008. This has led to some difficult, but necessary conversations among Southern Baptists, with calls for action to do everything possible to prevent such atrocities in the future.



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BEING ABOVE REPROACH
CERTAINLY MEANS HAVING
NO HINT OF SEXUAL ABUSE OR
COVER-UP IN THEIR PAST.

J.D. GREEAR

During his address to the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) on February 18, 2019, President J.D. Greear announced ten specific calls to action, one of which was to urge churches to reexamine their ordination processes for pastors and deacons. In Greear’s opinion, we have a problem with our ordination practices. He commented, “Why is it that our background check and screening process is often more rigorous for children’s ministry volunteers than people being ordained? This is a sacred responsibility and we have to take it seriously, ensuring each candidate lives up to the standards set out by the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3 – and being above reproach certainly means having no hint of sexual abuse or cover-up in their past.”³

This sentiment appears to resonate with several other Southern Baptist leaders as well.

Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, recently wrote, “Another issue Southern Baptists must reconsider is the practice of ordination...Lackadaisical ordination will produce doctrinally dubious and morally corrupt pastors. This trend must end and churches must take responsibility for those men they ordain for ministry.”⁴

Thom Rainer, former president of Lifeway Christian Resources, noted, “Because our ordination process is so weak, we ‘bless’ new pastoral candidates who may not be ready for ministry at the least, and who are sexual predators at worst.”⁵ Rainer also offered suggestions to improve

² <http://bpnews.net/52400/for-sex-abuse-trauma-churches-must-be-trustworthy>

³ <http://illinoisbaptist.org/greear-urges-bold-steps-to-prevent-abuse-care-for-survivors/>

⁴ <https://albertmohler.com/2019/02/11/reality-sexual-abuse-hits-home-happened-now/>

⁵ <https://thomrainer.com/2019/02/a-few-thoughts-about-ordination-in-the-southern-baptist-convention/>

Southern Baptist ordination practices in order “to protect our churches from predators and others who are not fit for vocational ministry.”⁶

Jimmy Scroggins, Lead Pastor of Family Church in West Palm Beach, recently tweeted, “I do not believe in transferable church membership and I do not believe in transferable ordination. Each church must take responsibility for its own vetting & qualifying of members and leaders. But networks of churches can assist one another in vetting & qualifying by appropriately sharing publicly available information. And there is strong momentum for the SBC to get a lot more intentional on this effort. I’m glad.”⁷



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R. ALBERT MOHLER

If these comments are true, there really *is* a problem with our current SBC ordination practices. However, no one quite knows for sure how bad it is because very little study of *actual* ordination practices has been completed. No one knows how thoroughly candidates for ordination are being examined. No one knows how many ordination councils require candidates to complete a background check. No one knows how many ordination councils examine a candidate’s sexual purity. No one knows if ordination practices in recent decades are getting better or worse. However, if we are going to fix the problems with our ordination practices, we must first know exactly what the problems are. This report is an attempt to fill that void of information.

The pages that follow summarize the results of a recent survey and provide significant insights into current SBC ordination practices. As the intended purpose of this study is to provide Southern Baptists with hard data, it is outside the scope of this project to make specific recommendations for improvements. These findings are shared with the hope of generating productive conversations among Southern Baptists as we seek ways to improve our ordination practices in the days ahead. May we rejoice for what we are doing well. May we weep and mourn for what we are doing poorly. And may we resolve together to improve our ordination practices so that every ordained Southern Baptist pastor or deacon meets the biblical qualifications, especially being described as one who is above reproach. That is the singular aim of the research that follows.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <https://twitter.com/JimmyScroggins/status/1096439597213667336>

The Study

An online survey was created in February 2019⁸, and ordained Southern Baptist pastors and deacons from across the SBC were invited to participate. They answered questions ranging from topics covered in their ordination council, to the logistical details of scheduling their ordination service, to the perceived thoroughness of the ordination process. In all, respondents were asked over thirty questions related to their ordination experience.

There were 555 total responses during the survey period of February 20-March 6, 2019. Respondents were ordained in a total of 34 states,⁹ and they currently serve in a variety of ministry roles, as follows:

60%	Current Pastors
17%	Association/Denominational Leaders
9%	Deacons
5%	Retired or Former Pastors
9%	Other

With such a large number of respondents from a variety of states and ministry roles, the survey results were fascinating and revealed several significant findings, detailed in the following pages.

⁸ The survey was designed in consultation with several Associational Mission Strategists serving in diverse contexts throughout the Southern Baptist Convention.

⁹ The survey was published and promoted on social media. In addition, it was e-mailed to the Executive Directors of each state convention and other SBC entity leaders, with the request to share it with ordained ministers and deacons in their respective ministry areas. The sampling error for the survey was +/-4.1%, which is well within the accepted range.

RESEARCH

During the survey, ordained ministers and ordained deacons were asked a separate, yet similar set of questions. As the analysis unfolded, the results for ordained deacons were found to be very similar to the results for ordained ministers. Therefore, to avoid redundancy and to significantly reduce the length of this report, the results that follow are only reflective of the ordained ministers who completed the survey, unless otherwise noted. This in no way minimizes the value of the deacons' responses. Whenever significant differences between their responses and those of the ordained ministers occur, those differences are noted in the report. The results that follow are broken down into eight different sections of topics:

- Section 1: General Demographics of Survey Respondents
- Section 2: Participants in Pastoral Ordination Councils
- Section 3: Content of Pastoral Ordination Councils
- Section 4: Logistics of Pastoral Ordination Councils
- Section 5: Characteristics of Pastoral Ordination Candidates
- Section 6: Requirements of Pastoral Ordination Candidates
- Section 7: Follow-up Practices of Ordaining Churches
- Section 8: Assessment of Pastoral Ordination Process

As the report will show, context matters when it comes to ordination practices. The survey results consider three categories of contextual factors:

- (1) The decade in which the survey respondent was ordained
- (2) The geographic setting of the ordaining church
- (3) The size of the ordaining church

Whenever one of these contextual factors revealed statistically significant differences among specific groups, those differences are noted in the report.¹⁰

¹⁰ Throughout the report, you will read about “statistically significant differences”. If you are unfamiliar with statistical jargon, “statistical significance” means that the difference is not likely to occur randomly or by chance but is instead likely to be attributable to a specific cause. In the context of this study, statistically significant differences are those differences that have been statistically proven with at least 95% confidence (or most of the time with 99% confidence).

Section 1 – General Demographics of Survey Respondents

Ministers who responded to the survey were ordained in a variety of church settings, as Charts 1.1-1.3 reveal. Chart 1.1 shows that ordained ministers who responded to the survey were ordained over the span of at least six decades.

Chart 1.1
Ordained Ministers By Decade

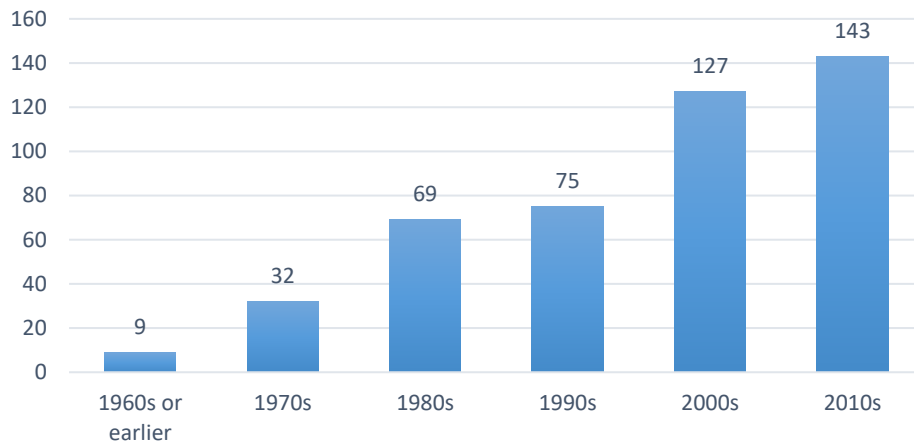
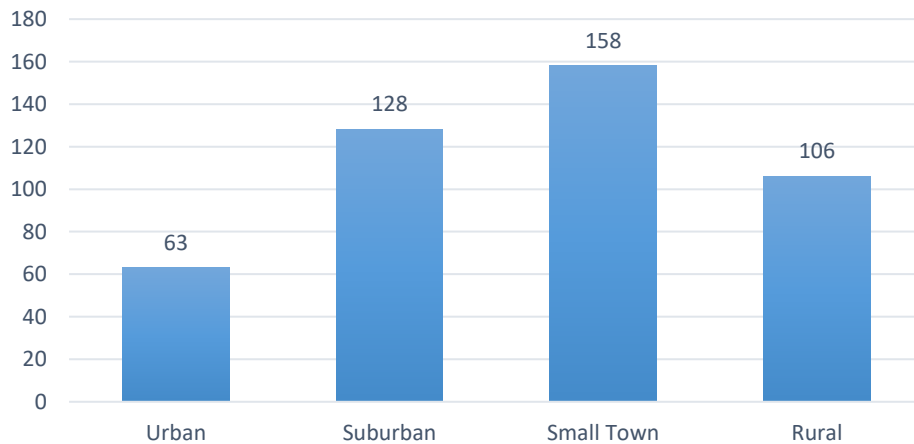
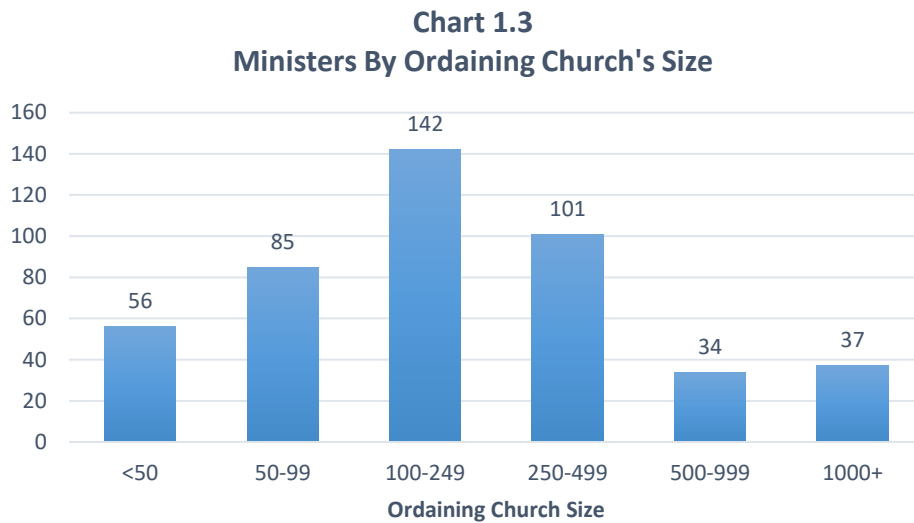


Chart 1.2 reveals good representation from each of the four geographic settings in the survey.

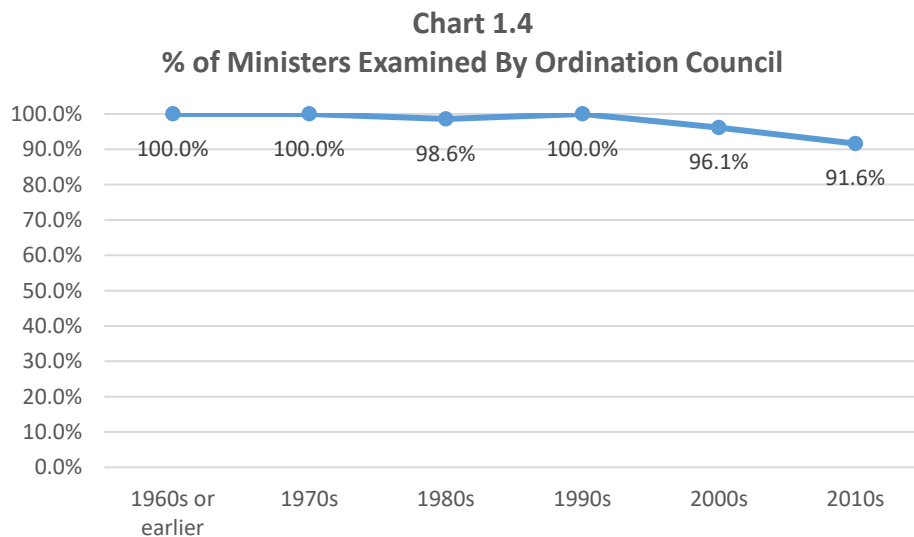
Chart 1.2
Ministers By Ordaining Church's Geographic Setting



The ministers who responded to the survey were also ordained in a broad range of church sizes, as Chart 1.3 shows.



Nearly all ministers who responded were examined by an ordination council prior to their ordination (96%). However, Chart 1.4 shows that the percentage has begun to decline in recent decades. While it may not seem like a drastic change, the difference in the percentage of ordained ministers examined by an ordination council is statistically lower since 2000.¹¹

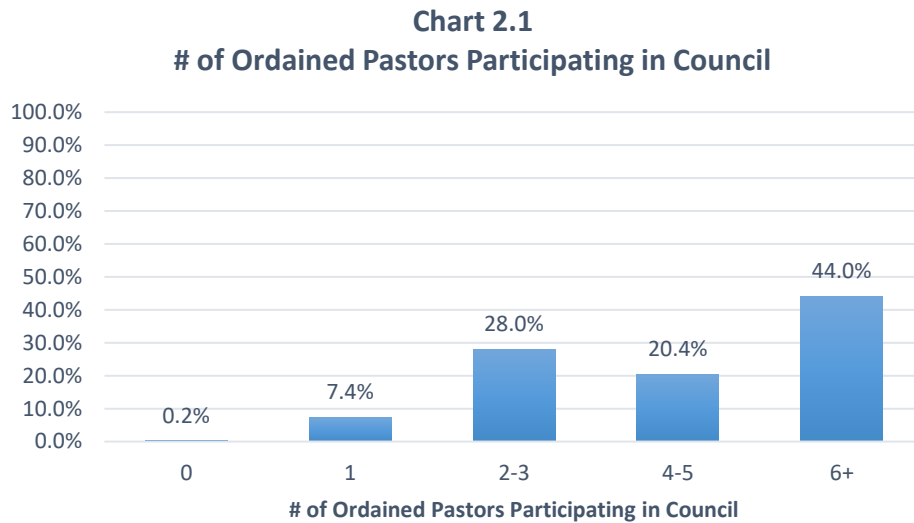


The results from Section 1 show that ordained ministers from churches of all shapes, sizes, settings, and time periods are reflected in the results that follow.

¹¹ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value = 0.001).

Section 2 – Ordination Council Participants

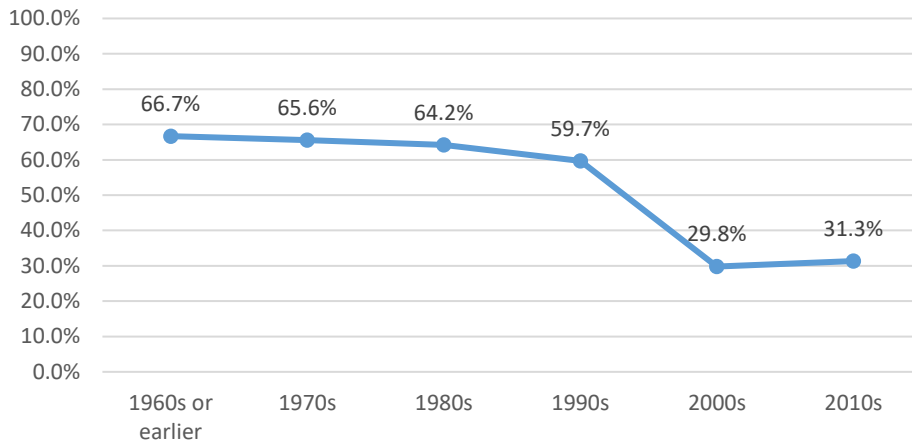
One of the questions the survey sought to answer was the makeup of SBC ordination councils. The results in this section shed some light on this question. While most ministers were examined by an ordination council prior to their ordination, the makeup of those councils vary greatly. Some councils included many ordained ministers, while some included very few. As Chart 2.1 shows, pastoral ordination candidates were most likely to have been examined by 6 or more ordained pastors during their ordination council. (Note: The majority of ordination councils for deacons include 2-3 ordained pastors {53.2%}. Only 6.4% of deacon ordination councils include 6 or more ordained pastors.)



While most ordination councils include 6 or more ordained pastors, Chart 2.2 shows the percentage has dropped considerably over the past two decades. In fact, the percentage of ordination councils including at least 6 participating pastors is statistically lower since 2000.¹²

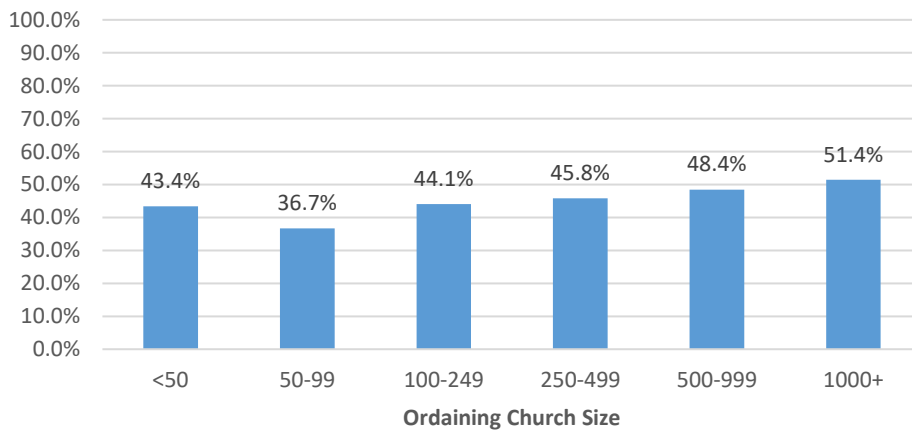
¹² Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).

Chart 2.2
% of Councils With 6+ Ordained Pastors Participating



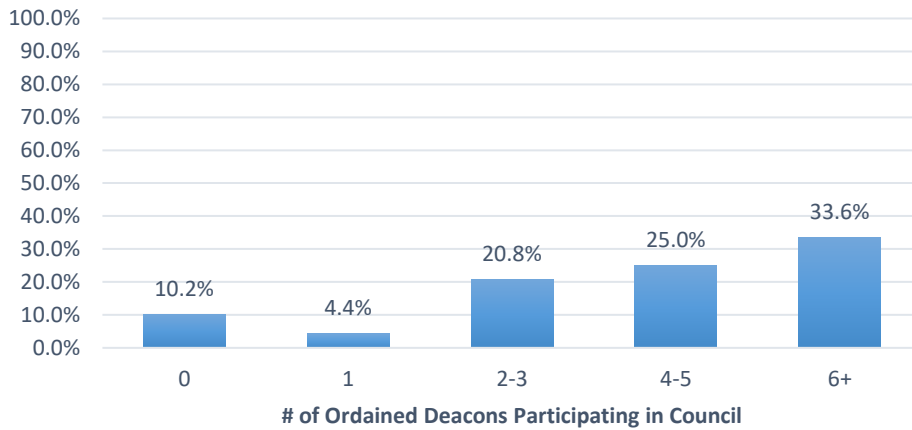
While the decade of ordination is a determining factor in the number of ordained pastors participating in the ordination council, the size of the ordaining church does not appear to be so. Chart 2.3 shows that larger churches tend to have a slightly higher number of pastors participating, but the difference is not statistically significant.

Chart 2.3
% of Councils With 6+ Ordained Pastors Participating



Similar trends were found for the number of ordained deacons who participate in pastoral ordination councils. Chart 2.4 shows that ordination councils are most likely to include 6 or more deacons. (Note: This finding is also true for deacon ordination councils, but the percentage of councils with 6 or more ordained deacons participating is much higher {57.4%}.)

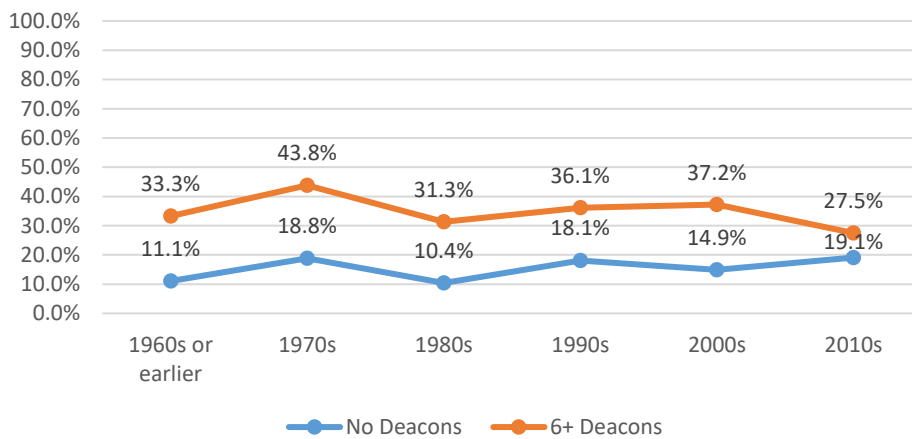
Chart 2.4
of Ordained Deacons Participating in Council



It is also worth noting that 10.2% of pastoral ordination councils had no ordained deacons participating.

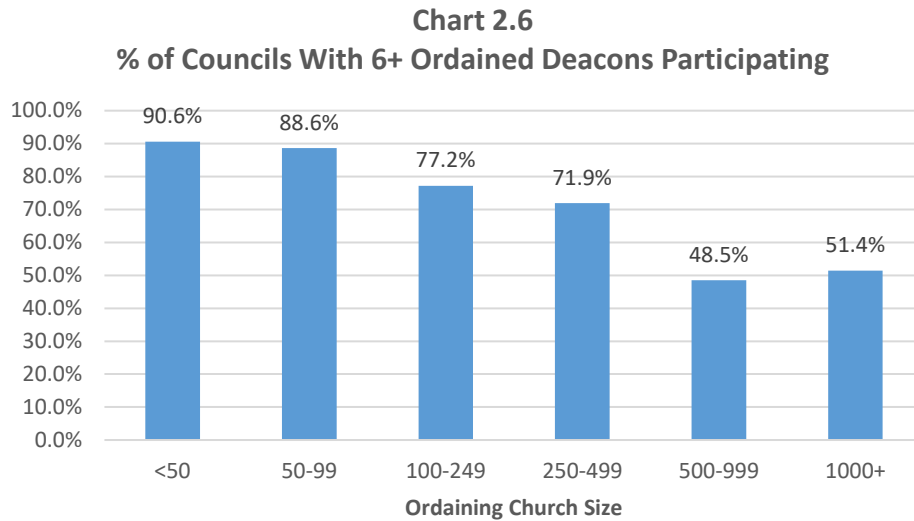
Chart 2.5 shows how the number of participating deacons has changed over time. Since 2010, the percentage of councils involving 6 or more deacons is at its lowest level during the study’s timeframe, while the percentage of councils involving no deacons is at its highest level during the study’s timeframe. While this is worthy of note, it has not yet reached the level of being a statistically significant difference.

Chart 2.5
% of Ordination Councils With Specified # of Deacons

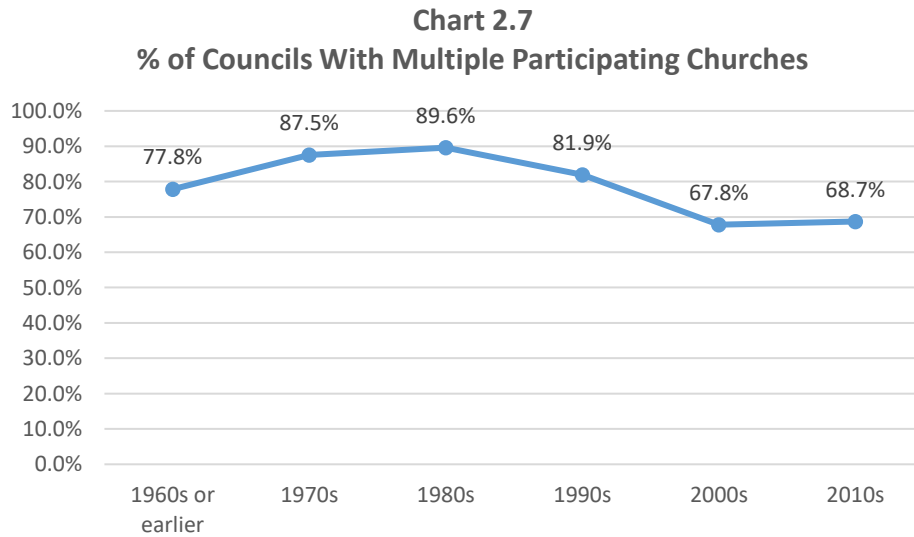


While there are no statistically differences in the number of deacons participating in the ordination council based upon the decade of the ordination, there are differences among the size of the ordaining church. Chart 2.6 shows that churches with at least 500 in average

worship attendance statistically include *less* deacons in their pastoral ordination councils than churches under 500 in average worship attendance.¹³



The survey also revealed that 3 out of every 4 ordination councils (75.5%) included ordained ministers from more than one church. However, as Chart 2.7 shows, the percentage has been declining recently. Since 2000, there are statistically fewer ordination councils including ordained participants from other churches than ordinations that took place prior to 2000.¹⁴

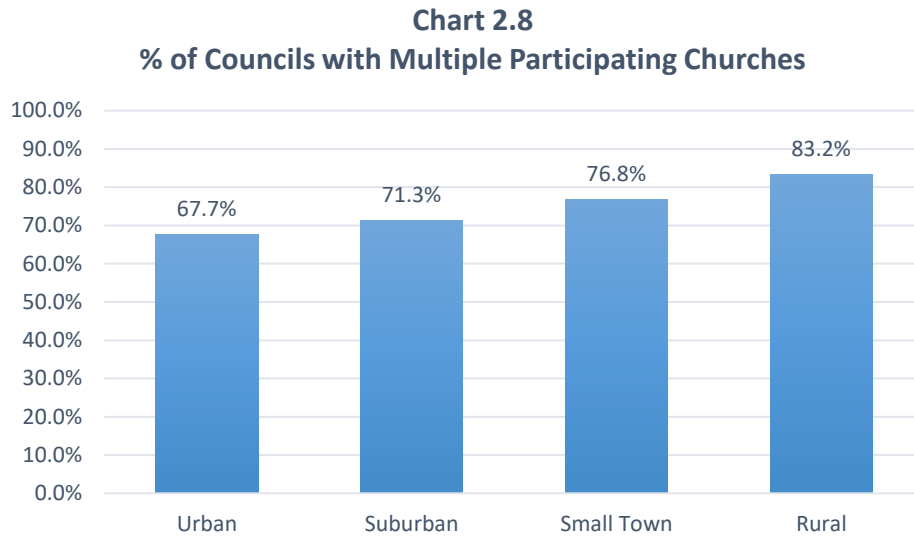


In addition, Chart 2.8 shows that the percentage of councils with pastors from multiple churches increases when the ordaining church is located in less populated areas. Statistically,

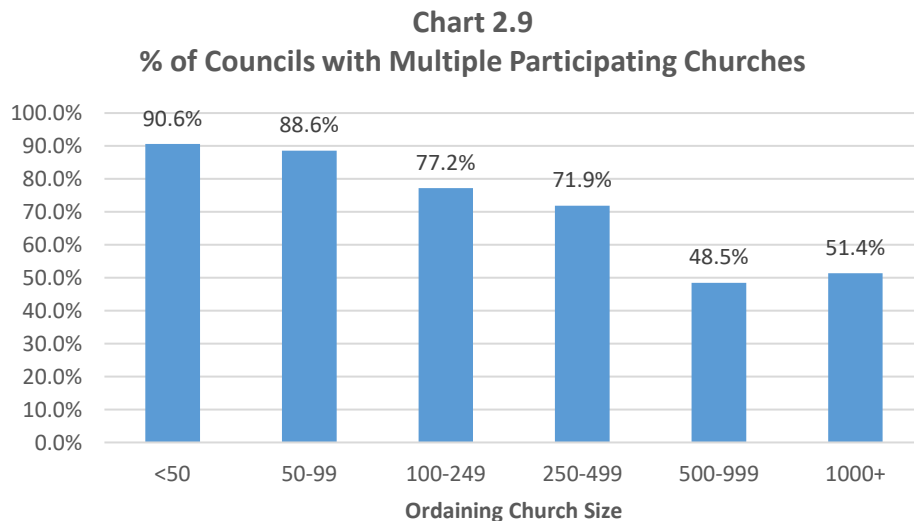
¹³ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value = 0.002).

¹⁴ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).

ordaining churches located in rural and small town settings are more likely to include ordained participants from other churches than ordaining churches in urban and suburban settings.¹⁵



Similarly, the likelihood that multiple churches participate in the ordination council decreases in larger churches, as Chart 2.9 shows. Churches with at least 500 in average worship attendance are statistically less likely to include ordained participants from other churches than those churches with less than 500 in average worship attendance.¹⁶



¹⁵ Difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.027).

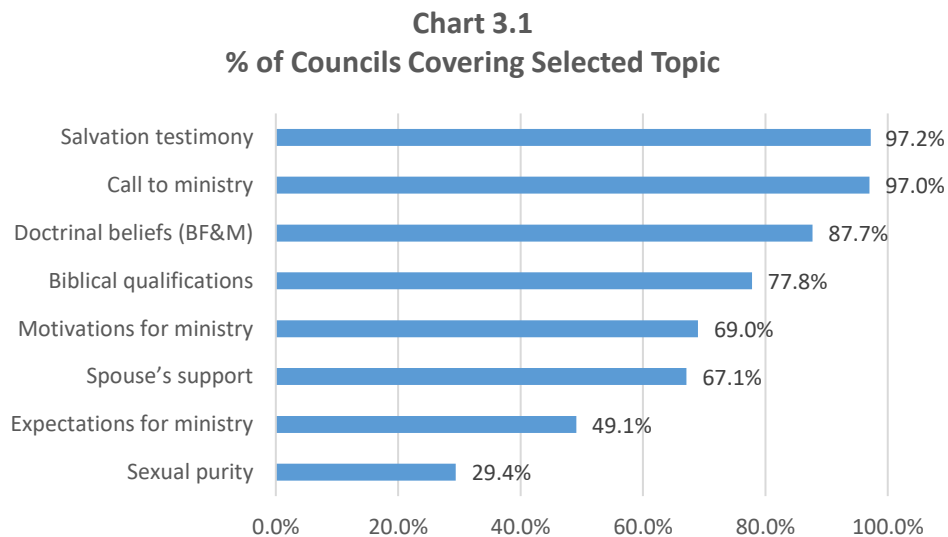
¹⁶ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).

Section 3 - Content of Pastoral Ordination Councils

Another question the survey sought to answer was the topics discussed during the ordination council. The SBC’s website explains that most ordination councils “review his testimony of salvation, his pastoral calling from the Lord, and his qualifications (including theological preparation and scriptural qualifications according to 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:7-9) for pastoral ministry.”¹⁷ The survey confirmed that these topics are usually covered in practice. In fact, nearly all ordination councils cover at least two topics:

- (1) The candidate’s salvation testimony (97.2%)
- (2) The candidate’s call to ministry (97.0%)

Chart 3.1 shows how frequently other topics have been covered.



As Chart 3.1 shows, the topics least likely to be covered are the candidate’s expectations for ministry (49.1%) and their sexual purity (29.4%).

Section 2 revealed a slight shift in the ordination practices of SBC churches over the past two decades regarding those participating in the ordination council. That shift shows up in this section as well. Charts 3.2 and 3.3 show how the two most popular topics have begun to be discussed less often since the turn of the century.

¹⁷ <http://www.sbc.net/fags.asp>

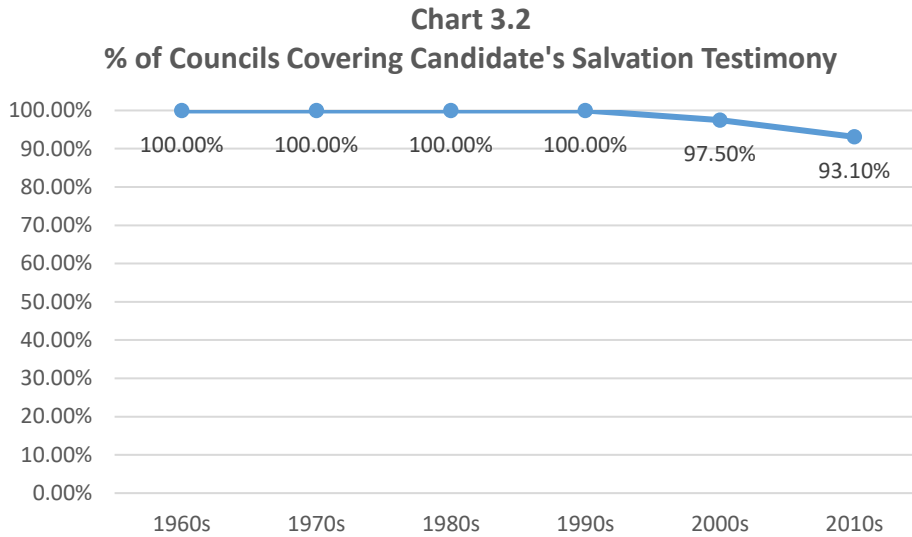
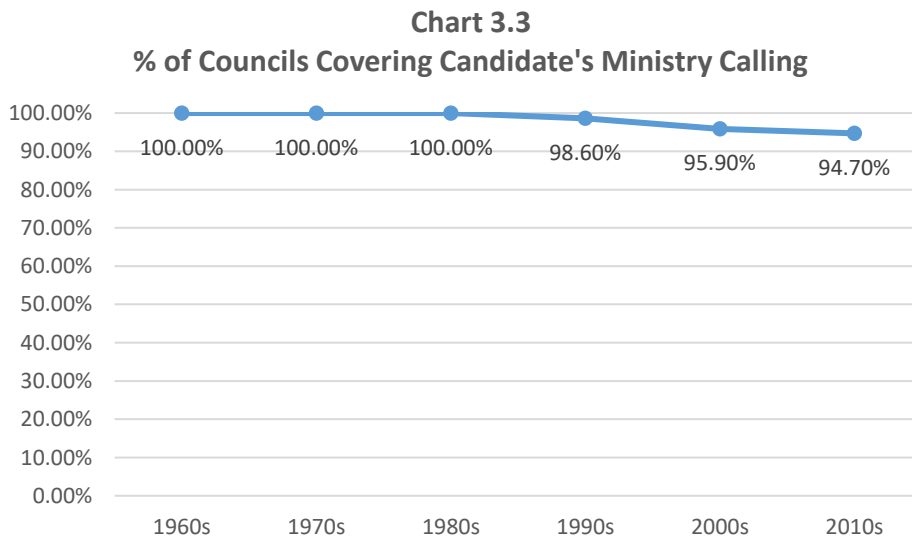


Chart 3.2 shows how the topic of a candidate’s salvation testimony has begun to be discussed less often during ordination councils. While the decline seems small in the chart above, there has been a statistically significant decrease since 2000. In other words, churches are discussing a candidate’s salvation testimony statistically less often during the ordination council since 2000.¹⁸

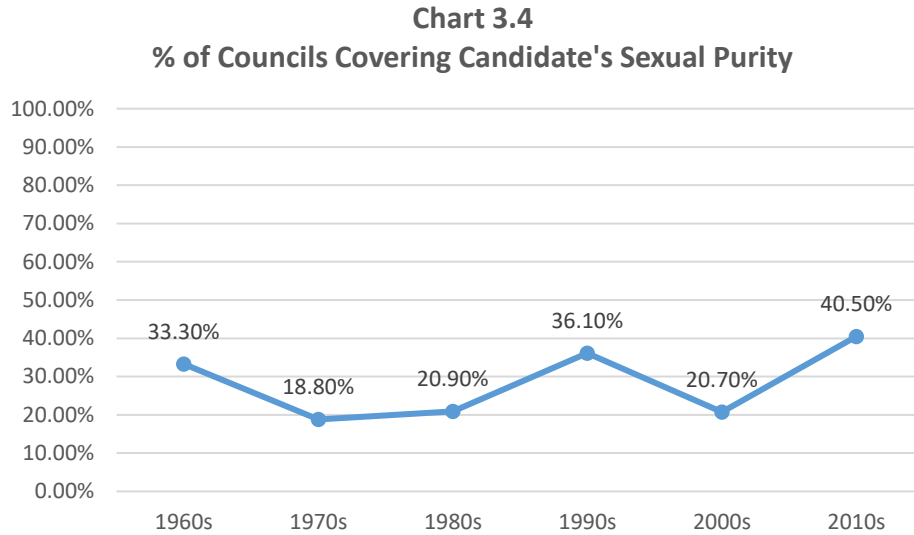
Similarly, the decline shown in Chart 3.3 appears to be small, but it is statistically significant. In other words, ordination councils are discussing the candidate’s calling to ministry less often since 2000 than ordination councils which took place before 2000.¹⁹



¹⁸ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value = 0.003).

¹⁹ Difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.012).

On the other hand, the topic of a candidate’s sexual purity was examined more often in the current decade than any time during the past 60 years, as Chart 3.4 shows. This increase is also statistically significant.²⁰



In light of current conversations regarding sexual abuse in SBC churches, this is a welcomed observation. However, there is still considerable room for improvement.

One final observation regarding the topics covered during the ordination council is that councils taking place in larger churches generally cover more topics than those occurring in smaller churches. Although this observation does not hold for all topics, it was true for the majority, as Chart 3.5 shows.

Chart 3.5
Topics Discussed During Council, Grouped by Ordaining Church Size

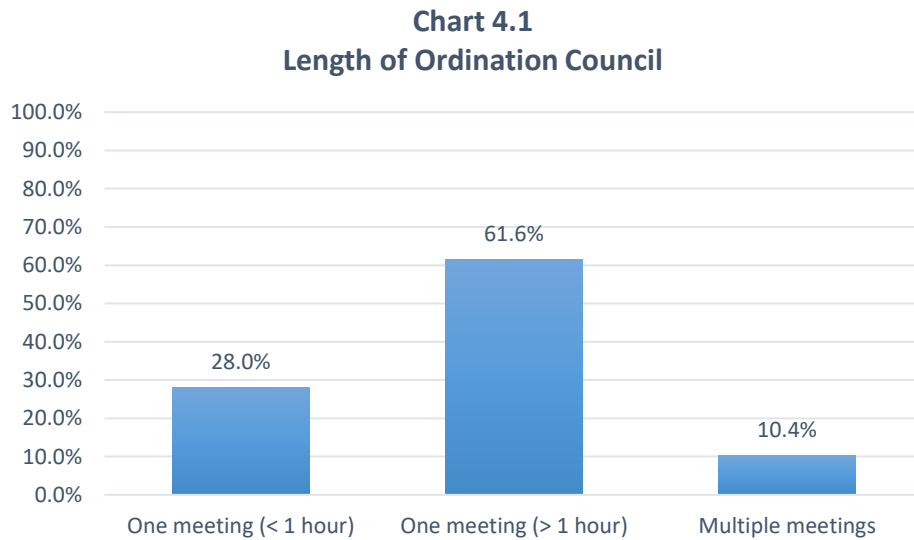
Topic	<50	50-99	100-249	250-499	500-999	1000+
Salvation testimony	94.3%	94.9%	97.8%	99.0%	97.0%	100.0%
Call to ministry	94.3%	94.9%	97.1%	97.9%	100.0%	100.0%
Doctrinal beliefs	83.0%	87.3%	89.0%	88.5%	93.9%	82.9%
Biblical qualifications	71.7%	72.2%	77.2%	83.3%	87.9%	77.1%
Motivations for ministry	62.3%	57.0%	68.4%	76.0%	69.7%	88.6%
Spouse’s support	64.2%	64.6%	66.9%	74.0%	57.6%	68.6%
Expectations for ministry	47.2%	40.5%	50.7%	50.0%	51.5%	60.0%
Sexual purity	34.0%	24.1%	27.2%	30.2%	24.2%	45.7%

²⁰ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value = 0.001).

Section 4 - Logistics of Pastoral Ordination Councils

Another goal of the survey was to identify the common logistical practices of ordination councils. How long does the council last? Is it a single meeting or multiple meetings? When is the ordination service scheduled, before or after the council examines the candidate? Is it perceived merely as a rubber stamp? This section provides answers to these questions.

Historically, Chart 4.1 shows how the majority of ordination councils have convened for a single meeting, which usually lasts longer than one hour.



However, the length of SBC ordination councils has been getting shorter since 2000 as Charts 4.2 and 4.3 show.²¹

²¹ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).

Chart 4.2
Length of Ordination Councils

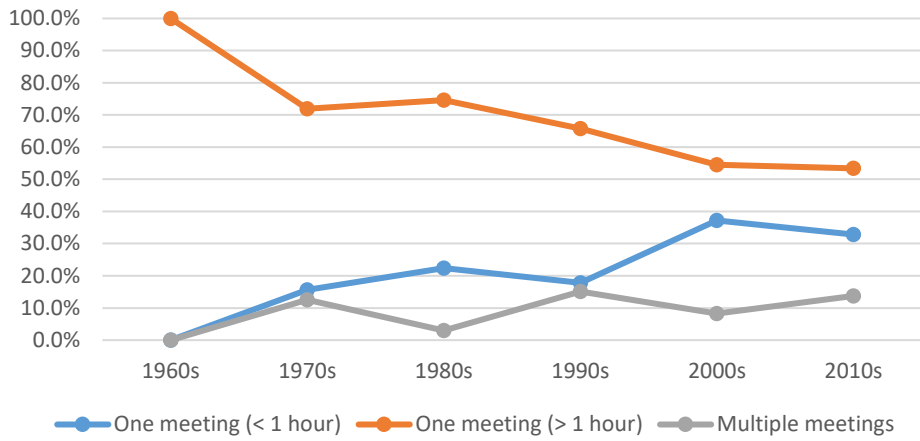
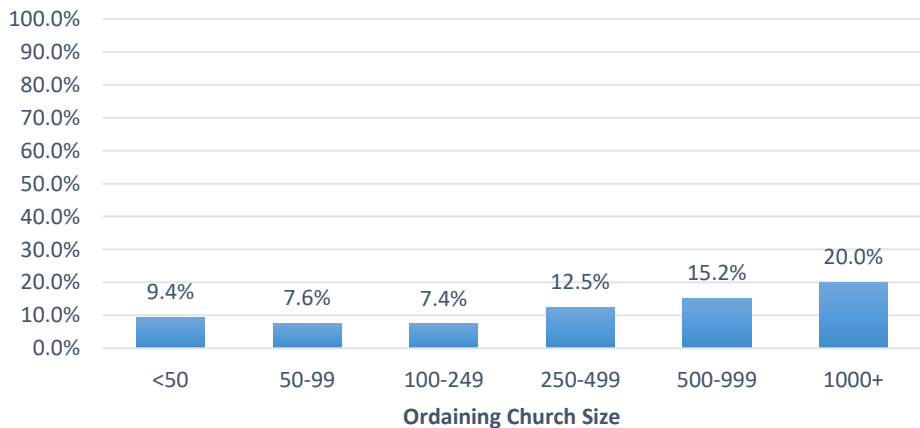


Chart 4.3
Length of Ordination Councils

Length	Overall	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
1 (< 1 hr)	28.0%	0.0%	15.6%	22.4%	17.8%	37.2%	32.8%
1 (> 1 hr)	61.6%	100.0%	71.9%	74.6%	65.8%	54.5%	53.4%
Multiple	10.4%	0.0%	12.5%	3.0%	15.1%	8.3%	13.7%

While the overall trend is that ordination council meetings are getting shorter, Chart 4.4 shows that ordination councils held in larger churches are still more likely to convene for multiple meetings. In fact, ordaining churches with an average worship attendance of at least 500 are statistically more likely to conduct their ordination council over more than one meeting than churches under 500 in attendance.²²

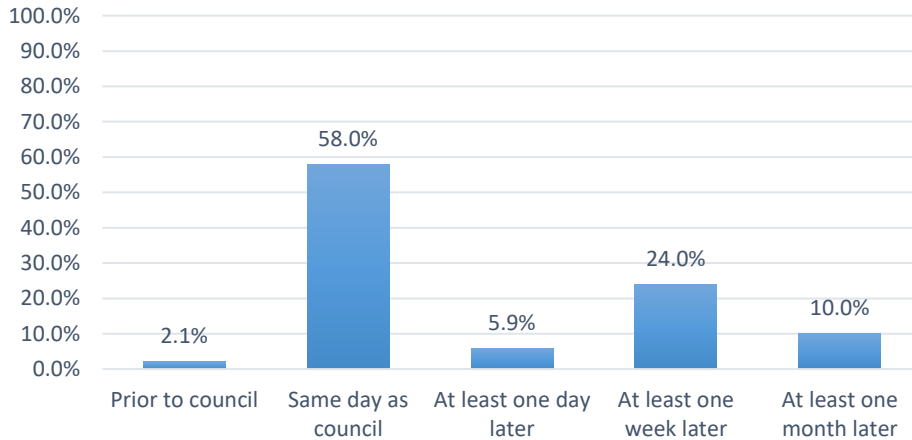
Chart 4.4
% of Councils Meeting More Than Once



²² Difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.036).

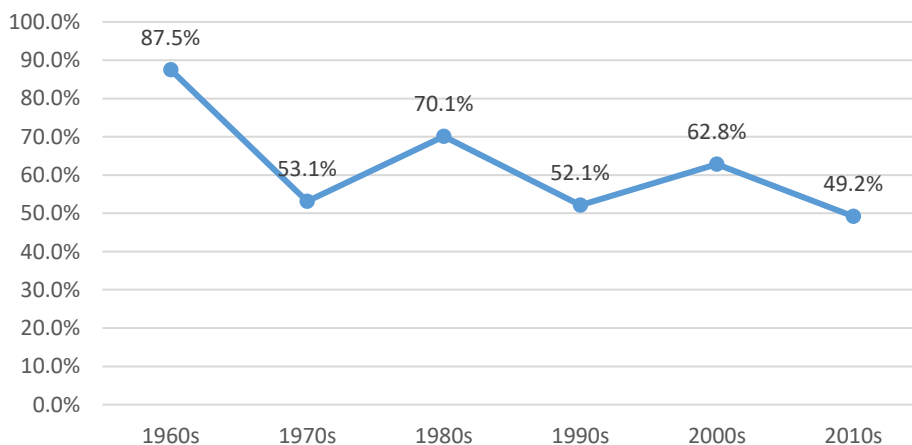
A common criticism often raised against SBC ordination practices is that it appears to be a rubber stamp due to churches scheduling the ordination service on the same day as the ordination council. Chart 4.5 confirms this is a common practice among SBC churches. In fact, in rare instances, the ordination service *precedes* the ordination council.

Chart 4.5
Scheduling of Ordination Service



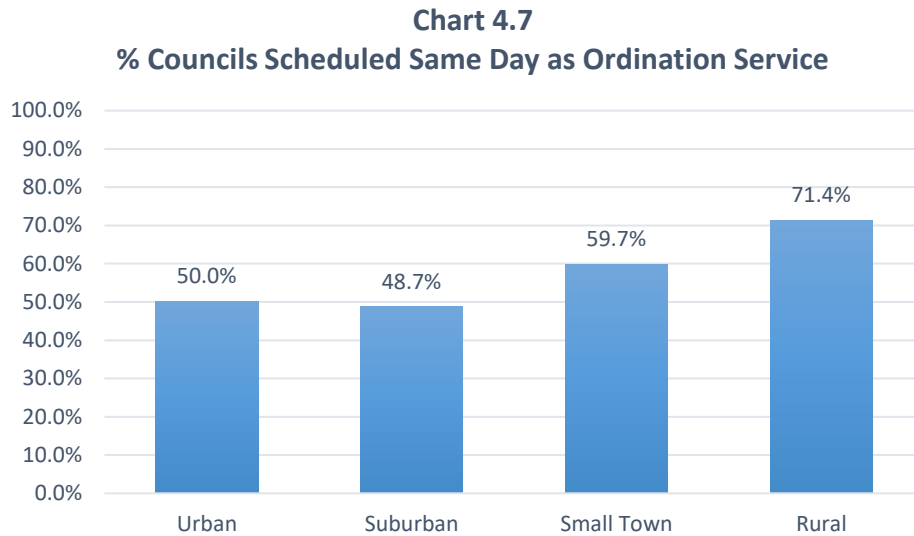
While Chart 4.6 shows that this practice appears to be on a slightly downward trend, there is no statistical evidence to support that conclusion.²³

Chart 4.6
% Councils Scheduled Same Day as Ordination Service

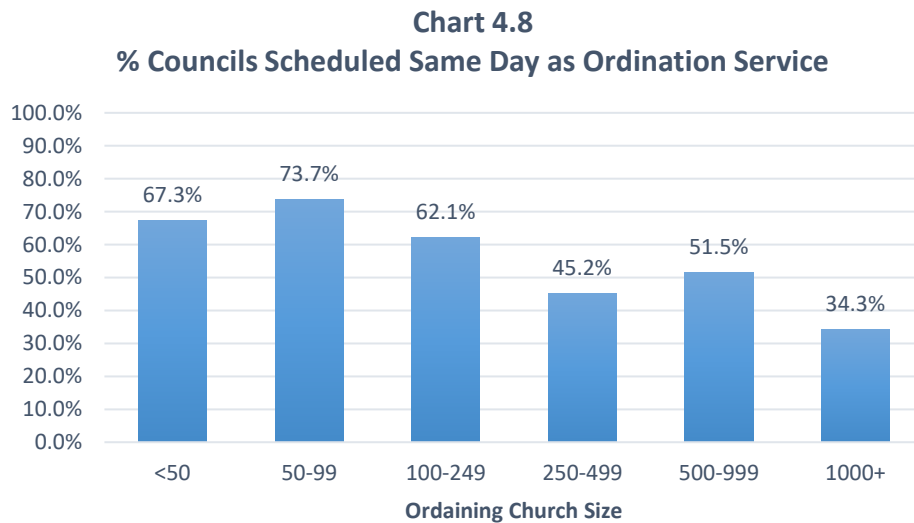


²³ There is no statistically significant difference in this percentage between ordinations occurring before 2000 and those occurring during or after 2000 (p-value = 0.335).

While this practice has been fairly consistent throughout the past 60 years, Chart 4.7 shows that it is statistically more likely to occur in churches in rural or small town settings than urban and suburban settings.²⁴



Similarly, the research also shows that this practice is statistically more likely²⁵ to occur in churches with an average worship attendance under 250 (see Chart 4.8).



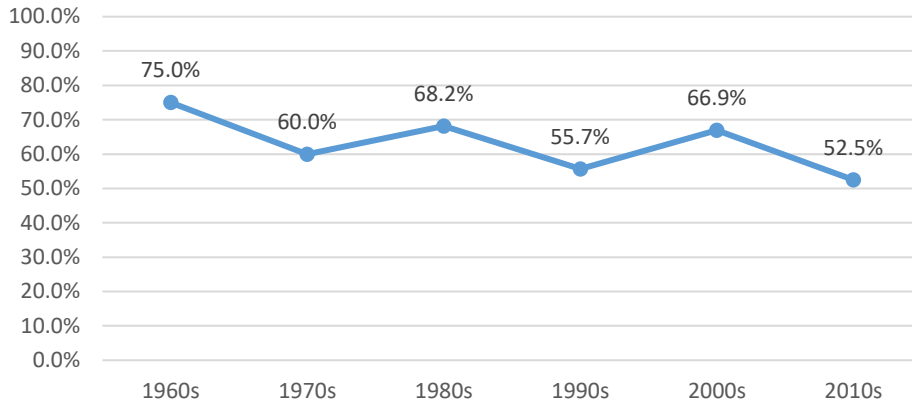
In addition to the majority of SBC churches conducting their ordination council on the same day as the ordination service, the majority of SBC churches (60.7%) have also publicized the ordination service to the membership of their congregation prior to the ordination council’s completed examination of the candidate. Similar to the observation shown in Chart 4.6, this

²⁴ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value = 0.002).

²⁵ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).

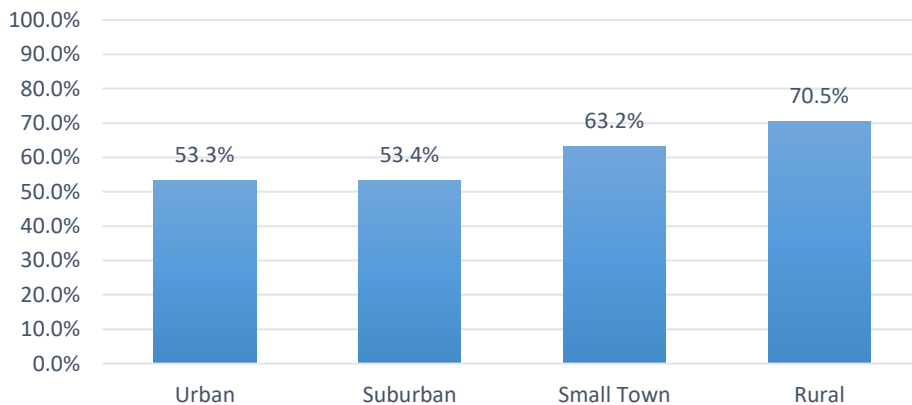
practice does appear to be on a slightly downward trend (see Chart 4.9), but there is no evidence of statistically significant improvement as of yet.

Chart 4.9
% of Churches Publicizing Service Before Completed Council



Similar to the observation in Chart 4.7 and Chart 4.8, the research shows that this practice is statistically more prevalent in more remote settings²⁶ (see Chart 4.10) and in smaller churches²⁷ (see Chart 4.11).

Chart 4.10
% of Churches Publicizing Service Before Completed Council

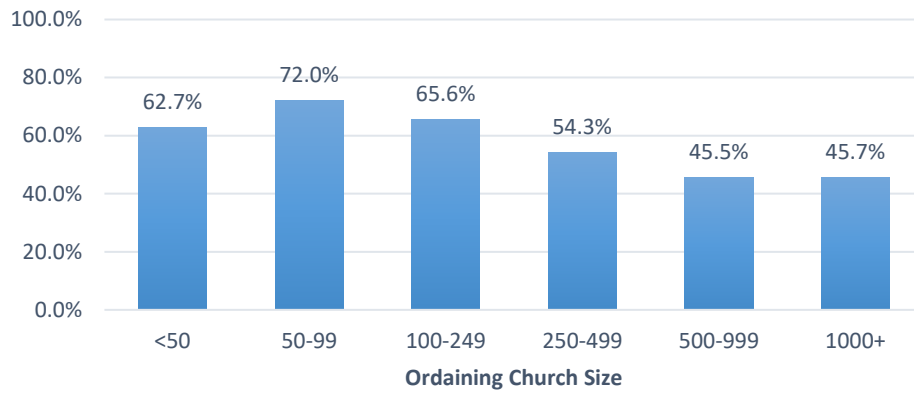


²⁶ Difference between churches in urban/suburban settings and small town/rural settings is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value = 0.009).

²⁷ Difference between churches with average worship attendance under 250 and churches with average worship attendance of 250 or above is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).



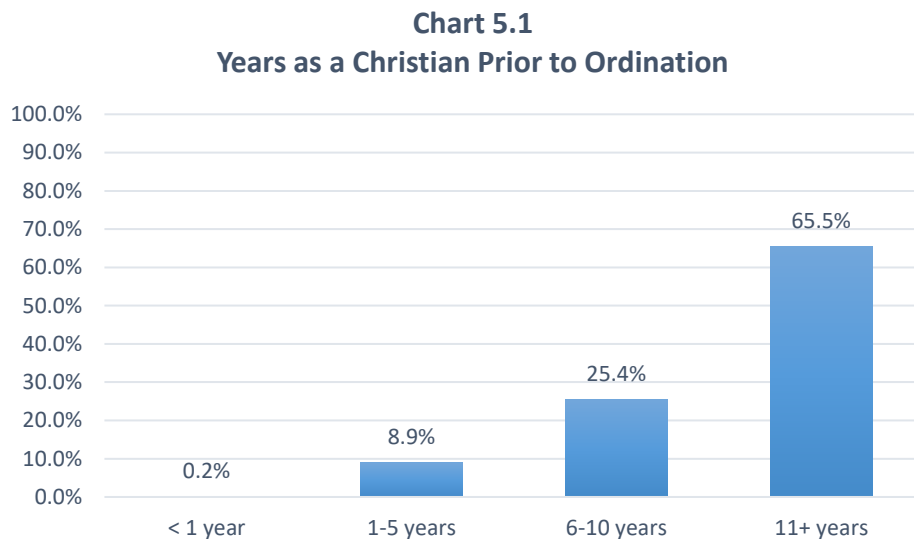
Chart 4.11
% of Churches Publicizing Service Before Completed Council



Section 5 – Characteristics of Pastoral Ordination Candidates

In addition to studying characteristics of SBC ordination *councils*, the survey also sought to study characteristics of pastoral ordination *candidates*. This section examines some of those characteristics.

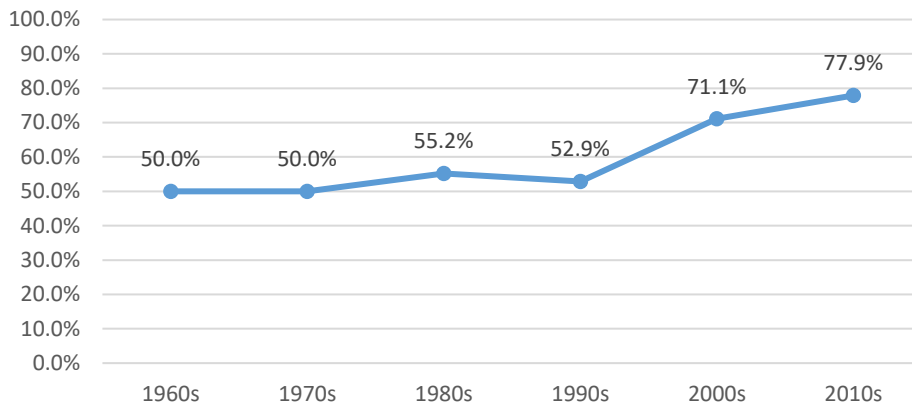
In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Paul lists the biblical qualification for overseers. In verse 6, he states, “He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.” SBC churches have taken this qualification quite seriously during the past 60 years. As Chart 5.1 shows, the majority of pastors had been a Christian for eleven years or more at the time of their ordination.



As Chart 5.2 shows, the percentage of pastors who had been a Christian for at least 11 years at the time of their ordination is statistically higher during the past two decades.²⁸

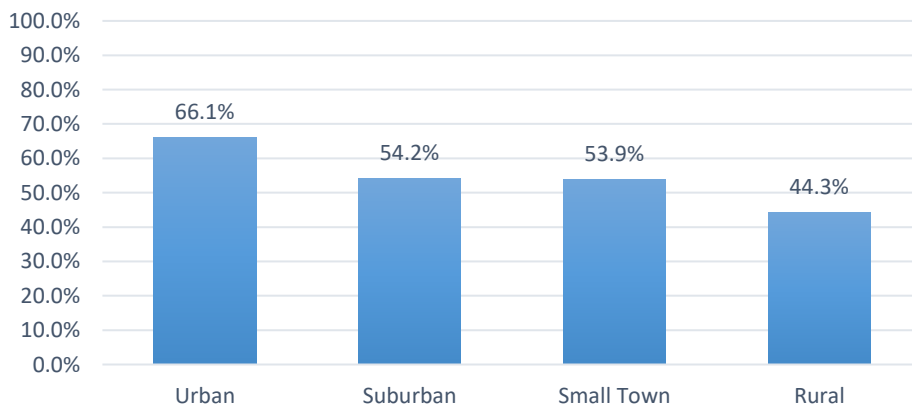
²⁸ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).

Chart 5.2
% of Pastors Who Had Been a Christian 11+ Years At Time of Ordination



Another interesting finding is that the majority of pastoral ordination candidates had not served as a pastor prior to their ordination (53.5%). As Chart 5.3 shows, this percentage appears to be higher in more populated areas, but the difference is not quite statistically significant.²⁹

Chart 5.3
% of Candidates Who Had Not Served as Pastor Prior to Ordination

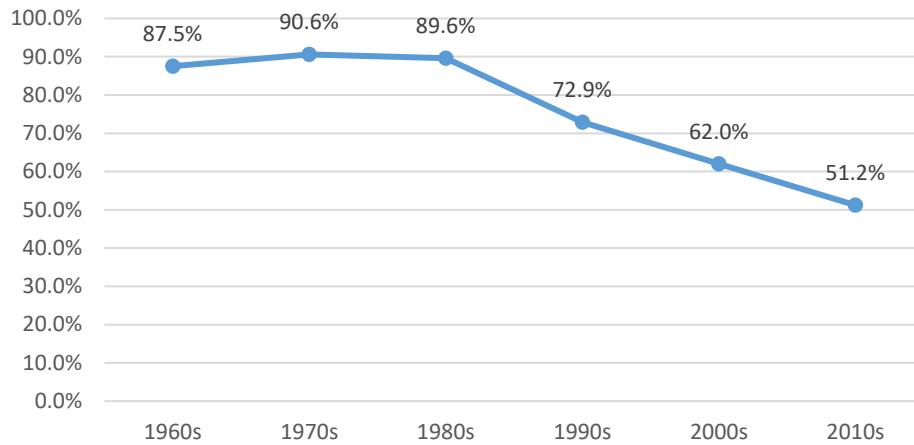


Another common practice among SBC churches is a separate licensing of gospel ministers, occurring some time prior to their ordination. For the majority of SBC ministers (67.8%), they were “licensed” to the gospel ministry prior to being ordained. However, as Chart 5.4 shows, this practice has been on a steady decline since the 1990s, and the decline is highly significant.³⁰

²⁹ Difference is *not* statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.059).

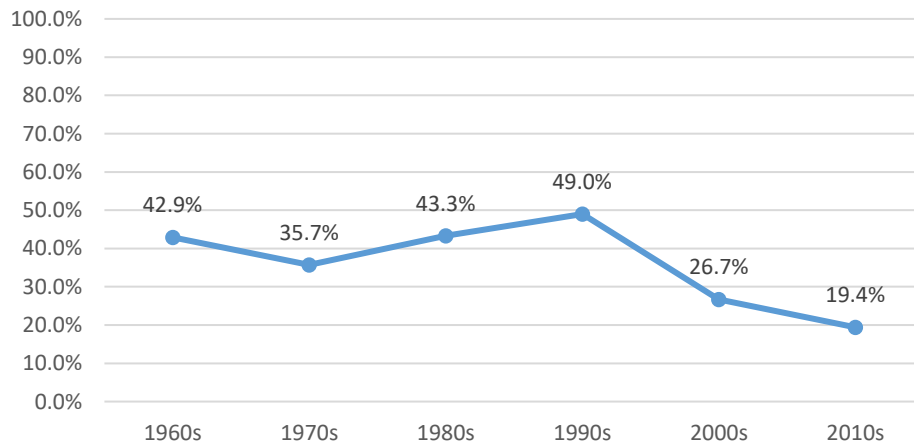
³⁰ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).

Chart 5.4
% Who Were Licensed Prior to Ordination



While most pastors who were licensed were examined by their Senior Pastor (87.1%), only 33.7% were examined by a “licensing council.” However, just as the practice of licensing prior to ordination itself is on the decline, Chart 5.5 shows that utilizing a licensing council is on a similar statistically significant decline since 2000.³¹

Chart 5.5
% Examined by Licensing Council

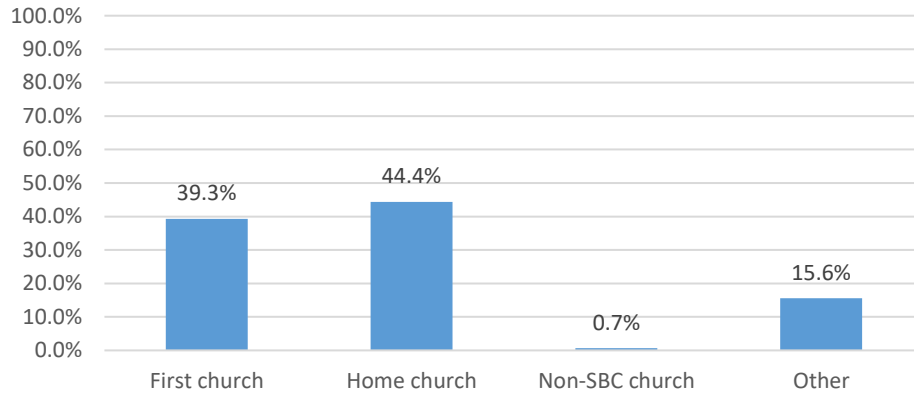


³¹ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).



One final characteristic of note was the pastoral ordination candidate's relationship to his ordaining church. Chart 5.6 shows that most respondents were ordained either by their home church (44.4%) or the first church they served as a vocational minister (39.3%).

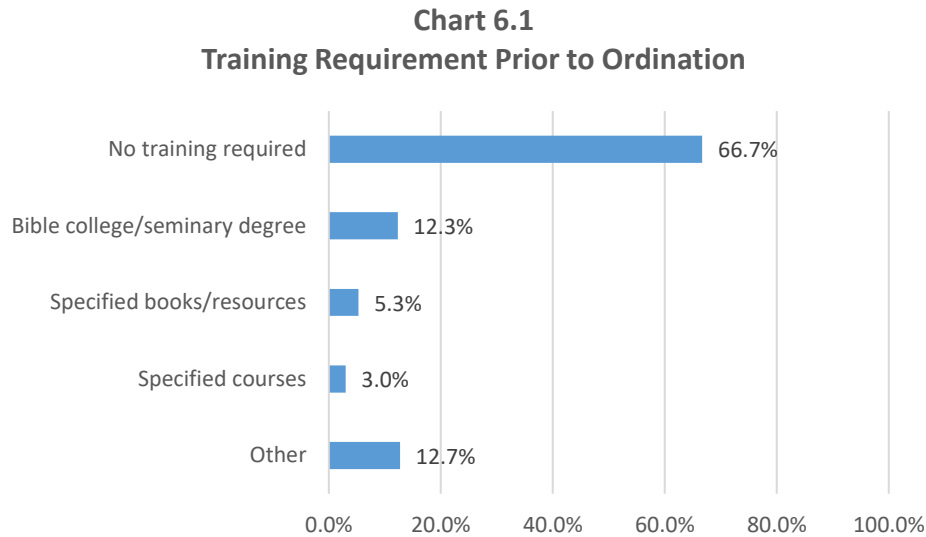
Chart 5.6
Relationship to Ordaining Church



Section 6 - Requirements of Pastoral Ordination Candidates

Some churches require their pastoral ordination candidates to meet specific criteria prior to being ordained (background check, training, etc.). However, the findings in this section reveal that most SBC churches have few, if any, requirements for their pastoral ordination candidates.

Chart 6.1 shows that the majority of SBC churches do not require any theological training prior to ordination.



However, Chart 6.2 shows the percentage of churches requiring no theological training prior to ordination has been on a downward trend. While the 2000s did reveal a spike in this percentage, the current decade is statistically lower than the percentage spanning the 1960s-2000s.³² To put it another way, more churches are requiring some type of theological training prior to ordination in the current decade when compared to the previous five decades.

³² Difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.037).

Chart 6.2
% of Churches Requiring No Training Prior to Ordination

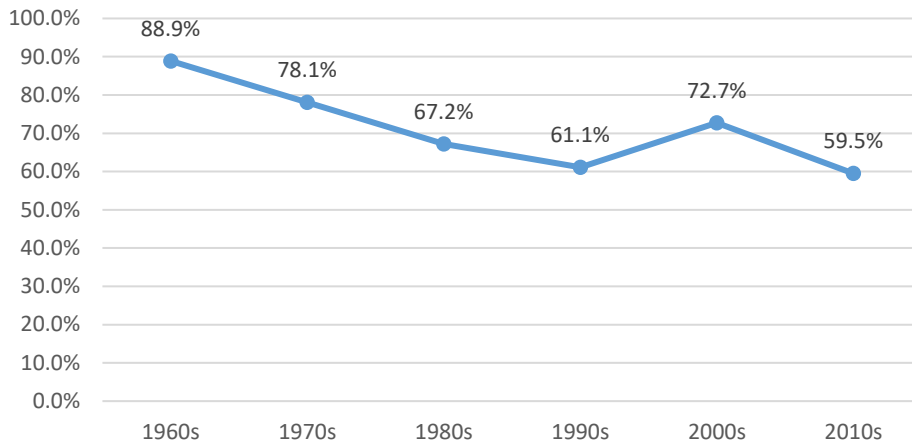
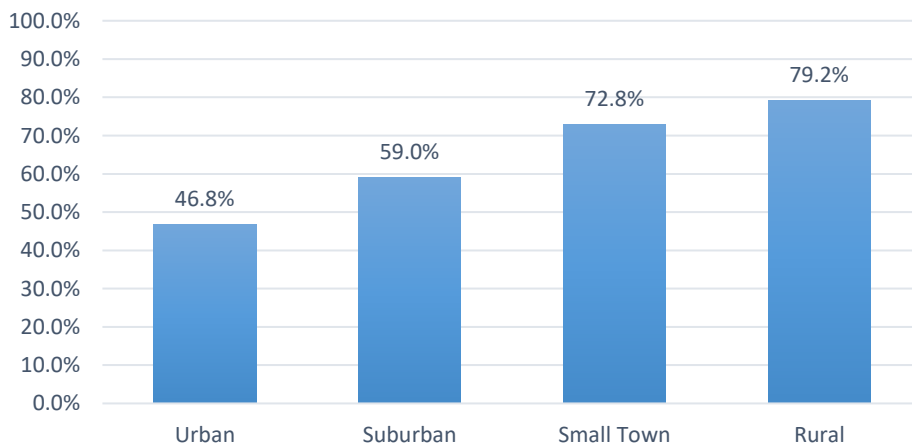


Chart 6.3 shows that the likelihood of requiring some form of theological training is also related to the geographic setting of the ordaining church. SBC churches in more remote settings (rural/small town) are statistically less likely to require some type of theological training than churches in more populated areas (urban/suburban)³³.

Chart 6.3
% of Churches Requiring No Training Prior to Ordination

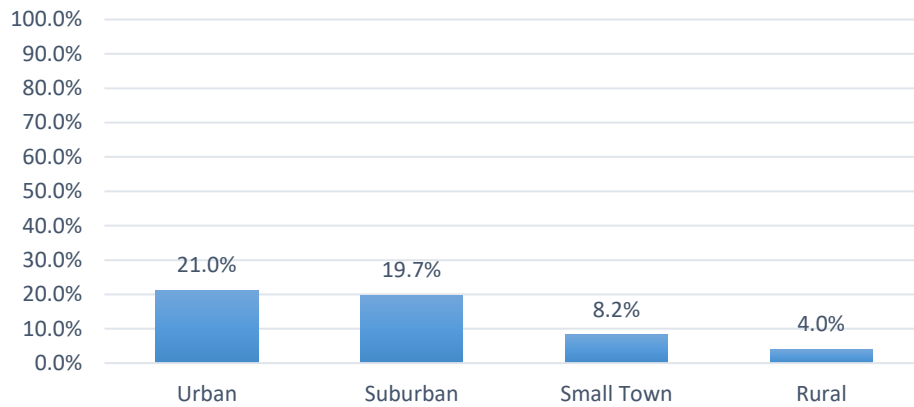


Furthermore, Chart 6.4 shows that the likelihood of requiring candidates to obtain a Bible college or seminary degree is also related to the geographic setting of the ordaining church. Churches in urban and suburban settings are statistically more likely to require a Bible college or seminary degree prior to ordination than churches located in rural or small town settings.³⁴

³³ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).

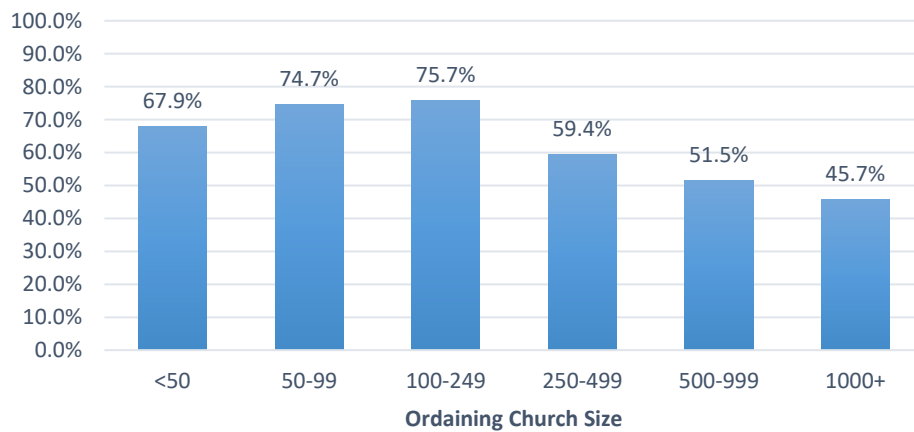
³⁴ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).

Chart 6.4
% of Churches Requiring Bible College or Seminary Degree Prior to Ordination



Similarly, the size of the ordaining church is related to the level of theological training required prior to ordination. Churches with less than 250 in average worship attendance are statistically less likely to require any theological training prior to ordination³⁵ (see Chart 6.5) and less likely to specifically require a Bible college or seminary degree³⁶ (see Chart 6.6).

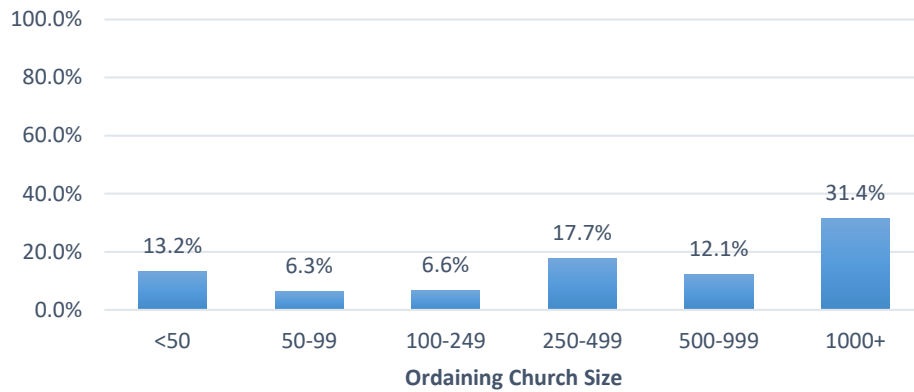
Chart 6.5
% of Churches Requiring No Training Prior to Ordination



³⁵ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).

³⁶ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value = 0.001).

Chart 6.6
% of Churches Requiring Bible College or Seminary Degree Prior to Ordination



In addition to not requiring theological training prior to ordination, the majority of SBC churches also do not conduct a background check on their ordination candidates (30.2% in the study required a background check). However, Chart 6.7 is encouraging, which shows that the percentage of churches conducting a background check is statistically higher since 2000.³⁷

Chart 6.7
% of Churches Conducting Background Checks

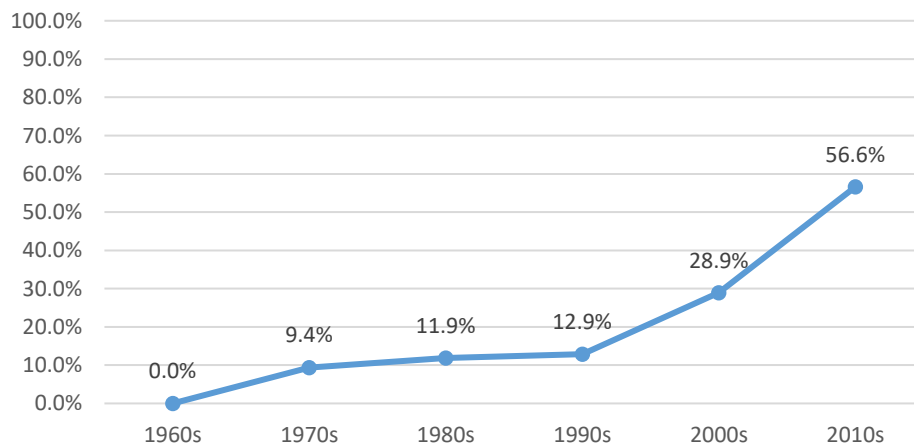
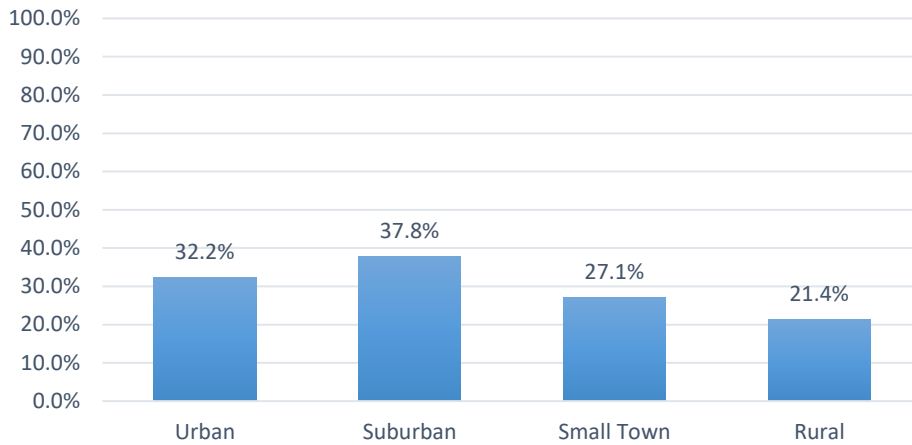


Chart 6.8 shows that this percentage is slightly lower in more remote settings (rural/small town), and again the difference is statistically significant.³⁸

³⁷ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value < 0.001).

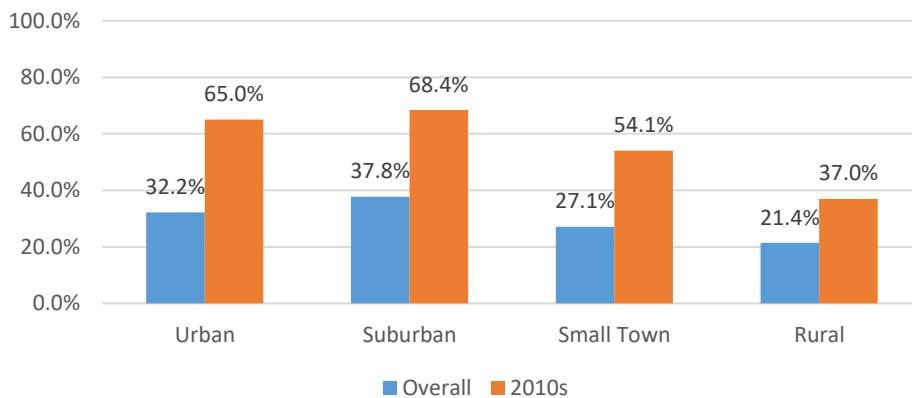
³⁸ Difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.015).

Chart 6.8
% of Churches Conducting Background Checks



Combining the insights from both Chart 6.7 and Chart 6.8, Chart 6.9 shows that churches in all geographic settings have increased the number of background checks in the current decade. Only churches in rural settings have not yet hit the 50% mark.

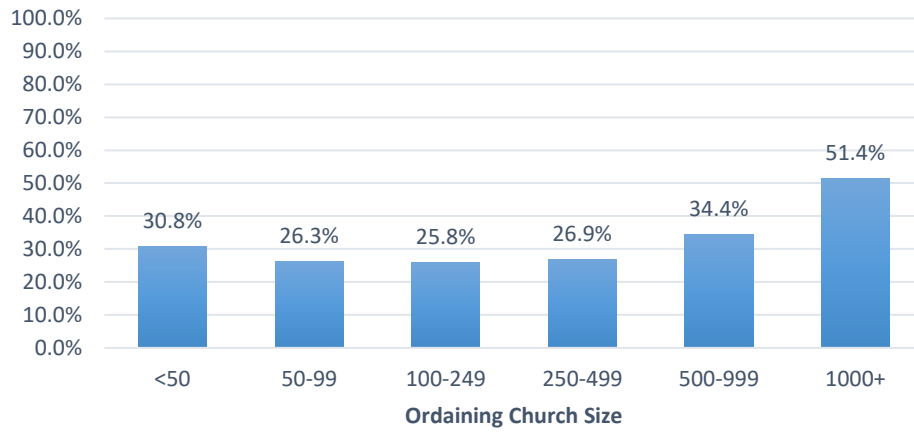
Chart 6.9
**% of Churches Conducting Background Checks:
Overall vs. Current Decade**



Finally, Chart 6.10 shows that larger churches (at least 500 in average worship attendance) are statistically more likely to conduct background checks on their ordination candidates than smaller churches (average worship attendance under 500).³⁹

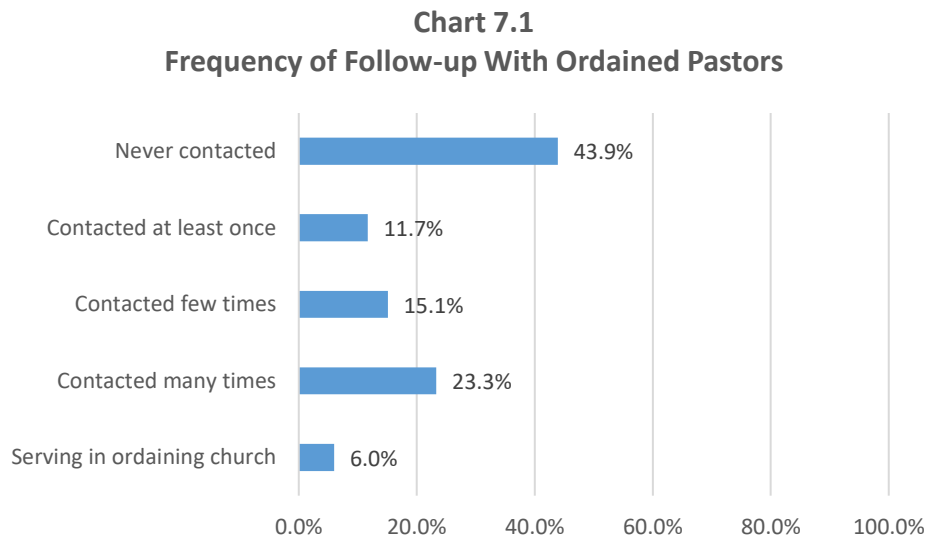
³⁹ Difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.012).

Chart 6.10
% of Churches Conducting Background Checks



Section 7 – Follow-up Practices of Ordaining Churches

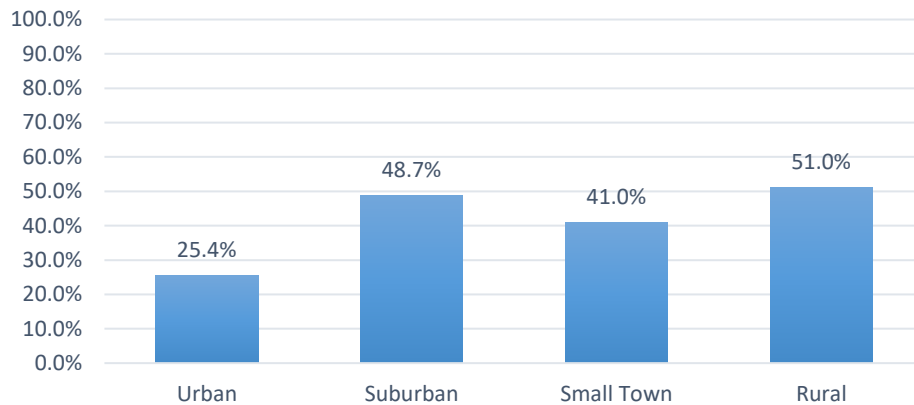
After the church completes the ordination service for a new minister of the gospel, does that church ever follow-up with those it ordains for ministry updates, accountability, or encouragement? The survey sought an answer to this question. Chart 7.1 shows that the most likely answer is “No.”



While there’s a good chance that churches in all geographic settings may not follow-up with pastors that they ordain, Chart 7.2 shows that ordaining churches in urban contexts are more likely to follow-up with pastors they ordain than churches in other geographic settings.⁴⁰

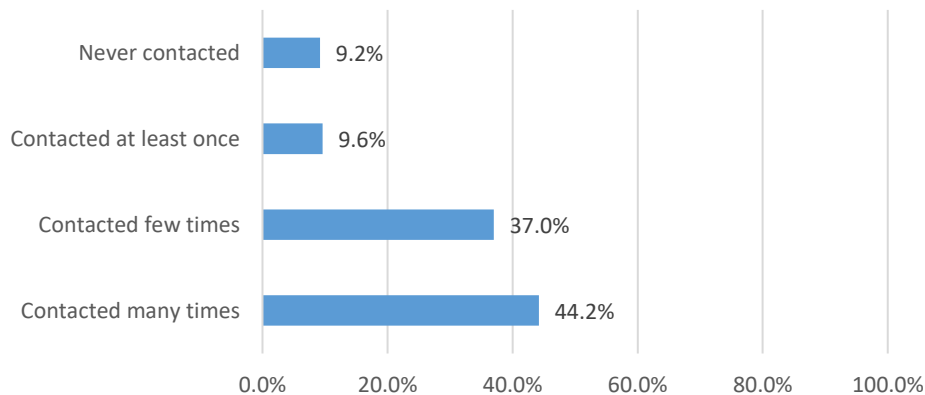
⁴⁰ Difference is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level (p-value = 0.002).

Chart 7.2
% of Churches Who Never Follow-up With Ordained Pastors



While Chart 7.1 shows that there is a good chance that an ordained pastor may not be contacted by their ordaining church, it appears that many of these pastors do not want to make the same mistake with those they ordain. Chart 7.3 shows how survey respondents are much more likely to follow-up with the men they ordain many times after the ordination.

Chart 7.3
Frequency of Follow-up With Those Respondent Has Ordained

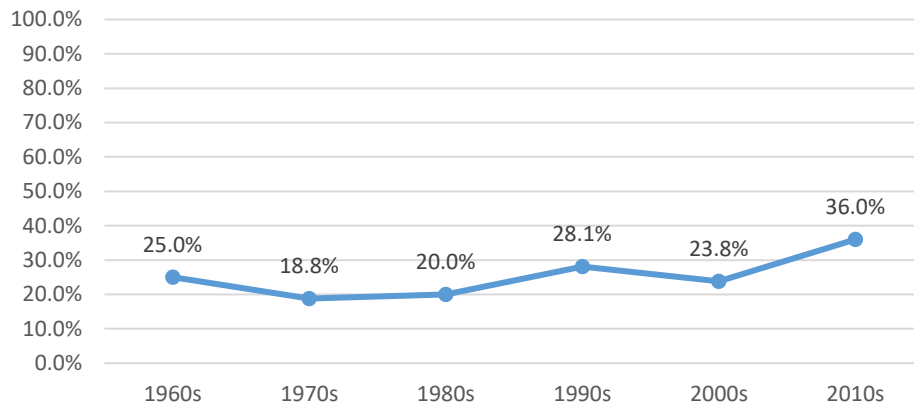


When pastors interview for a pastoral position in another church subsequent to their ordination, they are rarely questioned about their ordination process (only 25.3% of the time). However, as Chart 7.4 shows, the likelihood seems to be increasing, but it is not yet a statistically significant difference.⁴¹

⁴¹ Difference in the percentage since 2000 is *not* statistically significant at this time (p-value = 0.315).



Chart 7.4
% of Ordained Pastors Asked About Their Ordination in
Interview With A Subsequent Church



Section 8 – Assessment of Pastoral Ordination Process

This final section of research allowed respondents to assess their ordination experience. When asked to identify the one thing that most *impressed* them about their ordination experience, the top open-ended answers were as follows:

- (1) Quality of ordination council’s questions – 75 responses
- (2) The fact that the church took the process seriously – 44 responses
- (3) The love and support of ordination council members – 40 responses

When asked to identify the one thing that most *frustrated* them about their ordination experience, the top open-ended answers were as follows:

- (1) Lack of thorough questions/examination from ordination council – 67 responses
- (2) “Rubber stamp”/scheduling ordination service same day as council – 34 responses
- (3) Theological soapboxes by some ordination council members – 22 responses

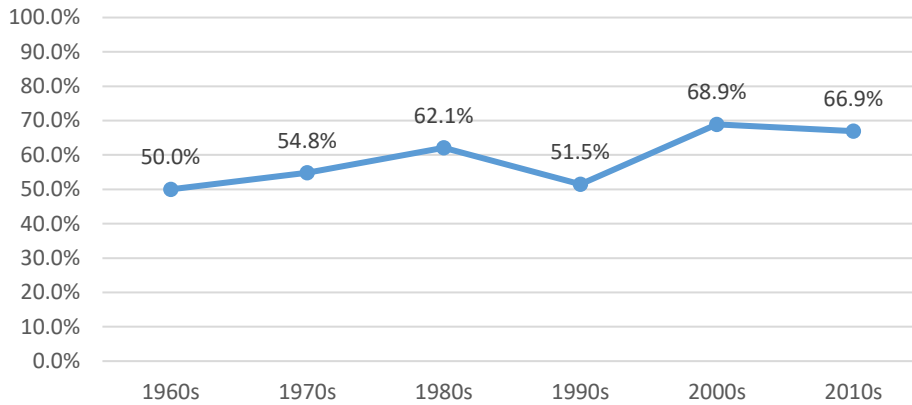
The frustration regarding a lack of thorough questions was seen throughout the survey. This frustration was particularly evident in the minds of those who have been ordained in the past twenty years. For each of the possible discussion topics identified in Section 3 (salvation testimony, call to ministry, doctrinal beliefs, etc.), those who were ordained since 2000 were less satisfied with the thoroughness of their examination than those who were ordained prior to 2000. *This was true for every topic.*

Given this observation, it’s no surprise that 94.8% of those ordained ministers agree (63.1% strongly agree) with the statement that SBC churches need to do more to examine candidates for gospel ministry before they are ordained.

Based upon other findings in the study, it should come as no surprise at this point that those who have been ordained since 2000 are statistically more likely to strongly agree that SBC churches need to do more to examine candidates, as Chart 8.1 shows.⁴²

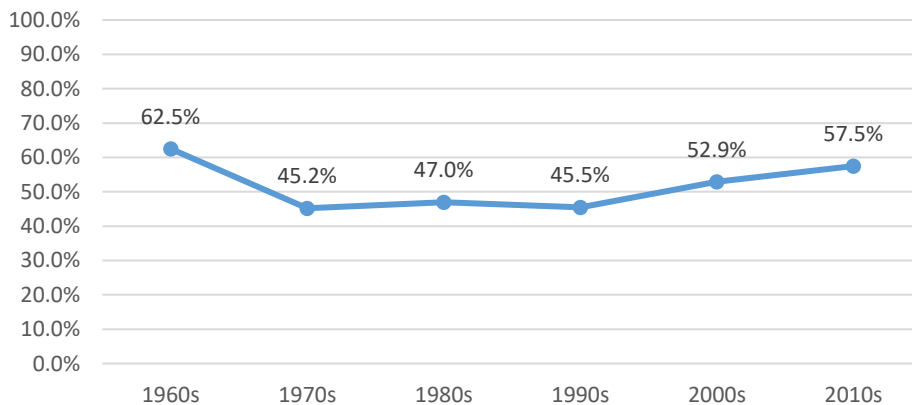
⁴² Difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.014).

Chart 8.1
% Strongly Agree That SBC Churches Need to Do More To Examine Ordination Candidates



Finally, the majority of ordained ministers (89.9%) feel that the ordaining SBC church has a responsibility to regularly follow-up with any man they ordain to the gospel ministry (51.8% strongly agree with the statement). And again, there seems to be more agreement with this statement among those who have been ordained in the past two decades (see Chart 8.2), but the difference is not quite statistically significant.⁴³

Chart 8.2
% Strongly Agree SBC Churches Responsible to Followup With Ordained Pastors



⁴³ Difference is *not* statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (p-value = 0.088).

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The research provided a plethora of insights. The following is a list of the most notable findings from the study:

1. **SBC ordination practices have significant room for improvement.** The observations from SBC leaders noted earlier in this report have proven true. While there are some encouraging trends, SBC churches need to improve our current ordination practices in a number of ways. Consider the following as a sampling of needed improvements:
 - Only 30.2% of ordained ministers were required by their ordaining church to have a background check as part of their ordination process.
 - Only 29.4% of ordained ministers were questioned about their sexual purity during their ordination process.
 - More than half of ordained ministers (58.0%) were examined by their ordination council on the same day the ordination service was held.
 - 60.7% indicated their ordaining church publicized the ordination service to the congregation prior to the ordination council completing their examination.
 - 43.9% of ordained ministers have never been contacted for follow-up by their ordaining church.
 - 94.8% of respondents agree (63.1% strongly agree) with the statement that SBC churches need to do more to examine candidates for gospel ministry before they are ordained.

2. **Discussions regarding a candidate's sexual purity are sparse, but on the rise.** As mentioned earlier, the catalyst for this study was *The Houston Chronicle's* report on sexual abuse within Southern Baptist churches. Unfortunately, the topic of a candidate's sexual purity is not discussed most of the time (only 29.4% of ordained ministers indicated that it was brought up during their ordination council). However, there has been a significant uptick (40.5%) since 2010.

3. **SBC ordination practices are changing in both positive and negative ways.** Since the survey included ordinations spanning every decade since the 1960s, several statistically significant trends emerged. The positive trends include:
 - More churches are requiring some type of theological training prior to ordination since 2010.
 - More churches are beginning to conduct background checks of ordination candidates since 2000.
 - More churches are questioning candidates regarding their sexual purity since 2010.
 - More candidates have been a Christian for at least a decade prior to ordination since 2000.

Some of the statistically significant negative trends identified in the study include:

- There appears to be less emphasis on the ordination council's importance in recent years. For example:
 - The number of ordained pastors participating in the council has declined.
 - The percentage of churches inviting participants from other churches has declined.
 - The length of the council is getting shorter.
 - Churches utilizing an ordination council as part of their process is declining slightly.
- The practice of licensing a candidate prior to ordination is in a steady decline.

4. **Ordaining churches in more populated areas set higher standards for their ordination candidates.** Churches in urban and suburban contexts are more likely to:

- Require some type of training prior to ordination.
- Conduct background checks of ordination candidates.
- Follow-up with candidates after their ordination (urban contexts only).

Churches located in less populated areas are more likely to:

- Conduct the ordination service on the same day as the ordination council.
- Publicize the ordination service to the church prior to completing their examination of the ordination candidate(s).
- Include participants from other churches.

5. **Larger churches are more thorough in their examination of ordination candidates.**

Larger churches are more likely to:

- Conduct multiple meetings of the ordination council during the process.
- Discuss more topics during the ordination council.
- Require some type of training prior to ordination.
- Conduct a background check prior to ordination.

By contrast, smaller churches are more likely to conduct the ordination service on the same day as the ordination council as well as publicize the ordination service to the church prior to completing their examination of the ordination candidate(s).

Much more could be said, but this summary highlights the most notable findings from the research. May these findings spur Southern Baptists on to improved ordination practices which ultimately leads to stronger churches!



About the Author

Jason Lowe serves as the Associational Mission Strategist for the Pike Association of Southern Baptists as well as the Executive Pastor for First Baptist Church in Pikeville, KY. In addition to these ministry roles, he utilizes his background in statistics to conduct analytical research on issues relevant to the church. Recent studies have ranged from examining spiritual lostness among different regions in Kentucky, the perceived value of local associations among Southern Baptists, best practices of pastor search committees, and current safety & security practices of local churches.

Jason holds a Bachelor of Science in Statistics from Eastern Kentucky University and a Master of Divinity in Missions and Evangelism from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Prior to serving in vocational ministry, Jason worked for more than 10 years as a Data Analyst in the healthcare industry.

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