

AN INQUIRY INTO  
THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SDA CHURCH

A mail survey  
conducted by

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Revised With Additional Data

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## INTRODUCTION

The survey reported here was assigned by Robert H. Pierson, president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, as a part of an on-going investigation into the attitudes of Adventists in North America concerning a number of significant and troublesome issues that face the church's leadership.

The first stage was conducted during the spring of 1977 and consisted of an inquiry among the resident members of the General Conference Committee to learn what they perceived to be the attitudes of various groups of Adventists "in the field." Those groups were: leading laymen, pastors, conference administrators, heads of institutions, and youth.

This survey deals with just one of the topics covered in the initial investigation: the role of women in the church. The five groups listed above, plus a large number of women, were asked to respond to six questions--three concerning women as local elders and three concerning women as pastors.

Questionnaires sent out numbered 956. At the date of cutoff, 654 usable responses (or 68.4%) had been returned. The results and interpretations that follow are based on these 654 responses. A description of the 654 respondents appears at the end of this report (Table 9). A sample questionnaire follows.

AN INQUIRY CONCERNING THE ROLE OF WOMEN  
IN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

May we have five minutes of your time?

Your opinions are valuable to us.

This brief questionnaire will take only a few minutes to complete.

Please fill it out yourself. Do not pass it along to someone else.

We want your opinions.

A stamped, self-addressed envelope has been provided for your convenience in returning the completed questionnaire to Office of the President, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 6840 Eastern Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20012.

Please respond within 48 hours.

DIRECTIONS:

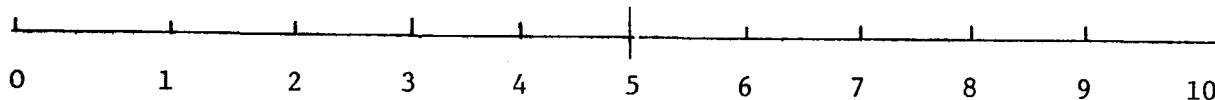
Consider each of the following questions carefully. Although they are similar, there are important differences in wording. Answer all items.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE  
SDA CHURCH

Part I. On each blank at the right, place a number from 0 to 10 based on the scale at the bottom of the page. If you are uncertain how you feel about the question, you may wish to put down a "5" (neutral).

1. In general, how do you feel about the election of a woman to carry the responsibilities of a local elder in her congregation? \_\_\_\_\_ (10)
2. In general, how do you feel about the appointment of an experienced and trained woman to pastoral responsibilities? \_\_\_\_\_ (12)
3. How do you feel about the ordination of a woman who has been duly elected as a local elder? \_\_\_\_\_ (14)
4. How do you feel about the ordination of a woman who has been duly appointed to pastoral responsibilities and has fulfilled the prerequisites for ordination as a minister? \_\_\_\_\_ (16)
5. How would you feel if your congregation elected a woman to serve as one of the local elders? \_\_\_\_\_ (18)
6. How would you feel if your conference committee appointed a woman as pastor of your congregation? \_\_\_\_\_ (20)

Very Unfavorable      Somewhat Unfavorable      Neutral      Somewhat Favorable      Very Favorable





## SURVEY RESULTS

An overview of the results (Chart 1) shows that (1) the attitudes cluster at the extreme ends of the favorable-unfavorable scale, and (2) more respondents feel unfavorable than favorable toward wider service for women at 5 to 4, 5 to 3, and 5 to 2 ratios. The respondents showed less favor toward ordination than toward service without ordination; more reluctance to accept a woman pastor in one's own church than a women local elder; and more readiness to favor women as local elders than as pastors.

Among the various groups of respondents that were analyzed, it was found that whether denominationally employed or not, whether in this position or that, the subgroups had about the same attitude patterns--with one notable exception, the institutional administrators. However, age and sex have a considerable bearing upon the pattern of response. In other words, any of the following tables that do not show age and sex breakdowns tend to look alike and tell about the same story.

Those who express the highest degree of favorability toward offering wider areas of service for women are women, ages 16-35; young men, ages 16-25 and some older; and the heads of institutions.

Before we go into more detail, let us look at how the results have been analyzed and reported:

The six questions on the role of women in the church were arranged in the questionnaire in an attempt to prevent having one question bias the response to another. That sequence resulted in an alternating of questions on the two roles of women--in the local church and in the pastoral ministry. This report alters that sequence so that all questions about a woman as a local elder (items 1, 3, and 5) are presented together, and all questions about a woman as a pastor (items 2, 4, and 6) are presented together.

In order to give a simple yet accurate picture of the responses, which ranged from "0" (very unfavorable) to "10" (very favorable), I have grouped the 11 possible responses into three categories:

Responses 0-3	Unfavorable
Responses 4-6	Neutral
Responses 7-10	Favorable

It should be noted that there is more than one way to look at the results that follow. The neutral responses may be cast out and only the two poles compared. Or the neutral responses may be studied to note which respondents felt uncertain or noncommittal on which questions. Neutral responses may be interpreted as representing those who don't care, who haven't thought very much about the matter, or who are waiting to be informed. These responses do tell us something.

Since the suggestion that women might serve as local elders or pastors is an innovation, we may logically consider that a majority, if not all, of the "neutrals" would not object to the innovation. Their responses might well be added to the "favorables" because if the changes dealt with here were initiated, presumably the "neutrals" would accept the change along with the "favorables." While this report does not add the neutral responses to the favorable ones, it will be seen that often the "unfavorables" consists of less than half of the respondents. For example, although 48.5% of the male respondents, age 56 and up, disfavor having a woman as a local elder in their own church, 51.5% are neutral or favorable (Table 3C).

#### ANALYSIS OF TABLES

Table 1 summarizes all 654 responses. The top half of the table deals with women as local elders. Nearly half the respondents (47.7%) disfavor the

ordination of women as local elders (item 3). Slightly fewer (45.4%) dislike the idea of women in the role of a local elder (item 1). And still fewer (42.3%) are opposed to having a woman serve as local elder in their own church. In summary, from about 2 to 12 per cent more respondents oppose women as local elders than favor that role.

The lower half of the table deals with women in pastoral positions. Here the opposition is greater, ranging from 49.8% to 56.7% on items 2, 4, and 6. Whereas there was less opposition to a women serving as a local elder in one's own church than to her ordination or to the idea in general, the matter of having a woman as one's pastor drew the highest level of disfavor (56.7%), with ordination to the ministry showing a little less opposition at 53.8%.

In the overall picture, half the respondents expressed disfavor with increasing the role of women in the church, one sixth were neutral, and about one third favored opening the way for women to serve as elders or pastors. About 40% were favorable or very favorable to having a woman local elder in their own church.

Chart 1 shows the relative frequencies (percentages expressed as decimal fractions) of responses to all six questions by the first group of respondents. Here the response categories are all given, from 0 to 10. This series of bar graphs shows clearly that (1) those who were opposed chose "very unfavorable" (0) and those who favored a larger role for women chose "very favorable" (10) producing a polarized response pattern; and (2) the pattern of acceptance of these innovations regarding women would be:

A woman local elder in my own church (pilot congregations)  
(item 5)

Women as local elders generally (item 1)

Women in pastoral positions generally (item 2)

Women ordained as local elders (item 3)

Women ordained as ministers (item 4)

A woman as a pastor in my own church (item 6)

Items 2 and 3 differ very little (see "collapsed" data in Table 1).

Table 2 shows the questionnaire responses by sex. There is not a great deal of difference shown between men's and women's responses except that women tended to be more unfavorable than men toward having a local elder in their own church or having women pastors at all. The women also usually gave fewer neutral answers. In this table and other tables where women's responses are given separately, it is sometimes the case that the closer the situation comes to the woman respondent, the more likely she is to disfavor the idea. This touches on what social psychologists call "social distance." Most people are not strongly opposed to something they may dislike until it comes close to them socially.

Table 3 is presented in six parts, one table for the responses to each of the six items. These tables show both age and sex breakdown on the left. Young women, ages 16 to 25, are highly favorable to all three items pertaining to women as local elders (Tables 3A, 3B, and 3C). They are also favorable to having women as pastors (Tables 3D, 3E, and 3F). The large majority of young women favor having women in new roles as opposed to being unfavorable to such innovations.

In the second age bracket more women favor than disfavor in all categories pertaining to women as local elders. In the matter of women as pastors, the women respondents, while slightly favoring the general idea of the woman as a pastor, were evenly divided on the matter of ordination of women as pastors, but were decidedly against having a woman as their own pastor.

Young men, ages 16 to 25, also gave more favorable responses than unfavorable ones on the matter of women as local elders, but their responses were not as strongly in favor as the women of the same age. They also slightly favored women as pastors, even ordained, and serving in their own church. Men respondents of ages 26 to 35 gave about the same answers as men of the older age groups, although in some items they showed a somewhat higher level of acceptance.

The greatest reluctance to change is seen in the two upper age groups, from 36 up, with an interesting characteristic showing up occasionally that the older age group, from 56 up, sometimes is less conservative than the age group 36 to 55.

Tables 4A and 4B show the responses of four subgroups of women: female Sabbath school superintendents, wives of local elders, wives of pastors and evangelists, and wives of conference/union officers. Table 4A deals with items 1, 3 and 5 on local elders, and Table 4B deals with items 2, 4 and 6 on the pastorate. Female Sabbath school superintendents gave quite strong unfavorable responses in all categories. It may be conjectured that these women do not wish to work closely with another woman over them, as a local elder or pastor would be. It is interesting to note that female Sabbath school superintendents nearly always were more opposed to a wider role for women in the church than the wives of local elders or the wives of pastors and evangelists, the two groups of women surveyed who would have the most potential concern about interpersonal relationships between men and women in the church. It is also interesting to note that the wives of conference/union officers are often more opposed to a wider role for women than the wives of the other category of denominational workers, pastors and

evangelists. The same kind of difference is seen among their husbands as will be seen in Tables 5 and 6: pastors and evangelists have much less objection to the wider role for women in the church than do conference and union officers. The majority of the wives of pastors and evangelists were either neutral or favorable to the idea of a woman serving as a local elder in their own church. In fact, wives of pastors and evangelists often gave the largest percentages of favorable responses as compared with the other three groups of women.

In Table 5, although pastors and evangelists gave more unfavorable responses than favorable ones, it can be seen that only in the matter of the ordination of a woman as a pastor and the matter of her serving in one's own church, did the unfavorable responses exceed the 50% level. In fact, 60% of the pastors and evangelists who responded were either neutral or favorable to the idea of having a woman elder in their own church. These, of course, are the men who would be most directly involved in working with women as local elders.

Table 6 shows the strong opposition of conference and union officers to the ordination of women either as local elders or as pastors. There is also a high unfavorable response to being a member of a congregation with a woman as a pastor. However, the majority of conference and union officers (51.1%) are either neutral or favorable to the idea of having a woman local elder in their own church, and nearly 50% (48.5%) are neutral or favor the idea of women local elders in general.

Table 7, reporting on the responses of institutional administrators, is sharply different from the other tables. With 43 persons responding, half gave favorable responses in all categories. A high level of favorable responses, as is true in some other tables, shows up in regard to having a woman local elder in one's own church.

Table 8 gives a comparison of denominational employees and lay leaders. The lay leaders apparently are more unfavorable toward the larger role of women than are denominational employees. On item 4 there was almost exact agreement. Once again, high levels of favorable responses came in the matter of having a woman local elder in one's own church. Another interesting result is that in most items denominational employees gave more neutral responses than lay leaders. That would seem to indicate that lay leaders are more opinionated or less open to change than denominational employees.

Table 1

TOTAL RESPONSE

(N=654)

Items 1-6

Frequency Distribution\*  
(expressed as percentages)

<u>Item</u>	<u>A T T I T U D E</u>		
	<u>Unfavorable (0-3)</u>	<u>Neutral (4-6)</u>	<u>Favorable (7-10)</u>
1	45.4	16.8	37.8
3	47.7	16.8	35.5
5	42.3	17.4	40.1
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2	49.8	17.9	32.1
4	53.8	15.6	30.6
6	56.7	17.4	25.9

\* Add 0.2 to distribution in Items 2 and 5 for "no response."

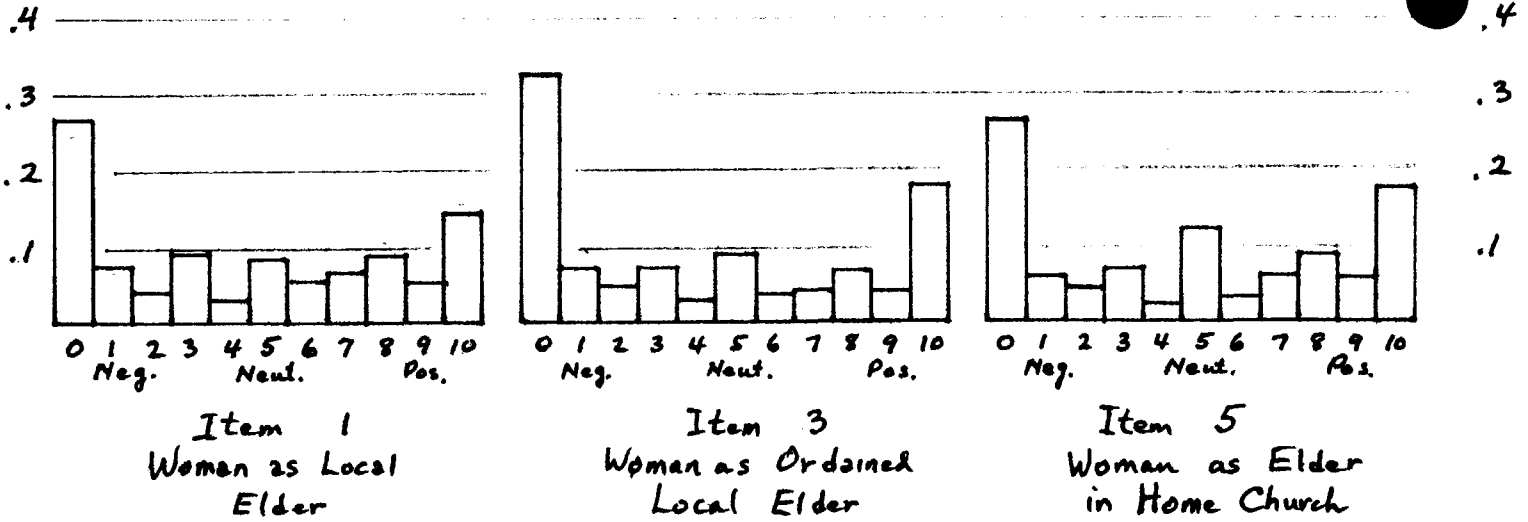
Chart 1

# ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

562 RESPONSES

Relative Frequencies

## Women as Local Elders



## Women in Pastoral Positions

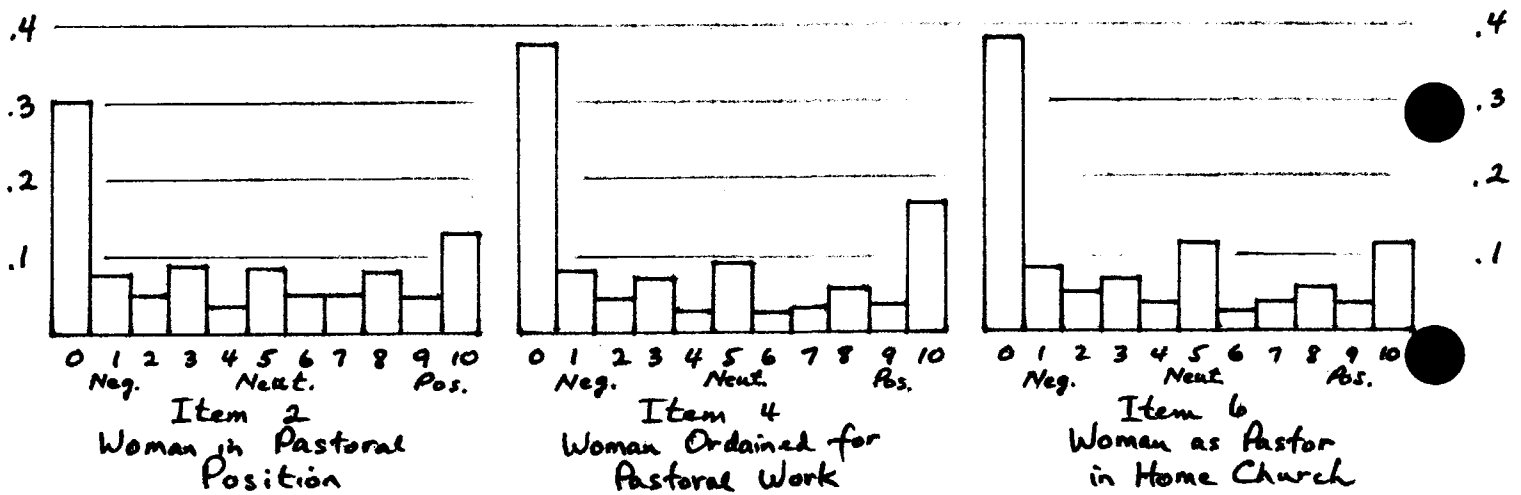


Table 2

RESPONSES BY SEX

(Male - N=335)  
 (Female - N=295)  
 (Sex Not  
 Given - N=24)

Items 1 - 6

Frequency Distribution  
 (expressed as percentages)

A T T I T U D E

<u>Item</u>	<u>Unfavorable</u> (0-3)	<u>Neutral</u> (4-6)	<u>Favorable</u> (7-10)
1 M	43.3	18.8	37.9
1 F	46.4	14.9	38.7
3 M	45.1	18.5	36.4
3 F	49.2	15.9	34.9
5 M	39.1	19.7	41.2
5 F*	44.4	15.9	39.4
-----			
2 M	47.2	20.0	32.8
2 F*	52.2	15.6	31.9
4 M	52.6	14.6	32.8
4 F	54.2	17.3	28.5
6 M	54.0	17.3	28.7
6 F	59.0	18.3	22.7

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\* One item not answered

Table 3A

RESPONSE BY AGE AND SEX

(N=622)

Item 1

Woman as Local Elder

Frequency Distribution  
(expressed as percentages)

A T T I T U D E

<u>AGE</u>		<u>Unfavorable (0-3)</u>	<u>Neutral (4-6)</u>	<u>Favorable (7-10)</u>
16-	M	24.3	24.3	51.4
25	F	23.5	9.8	66.7
26-	M	41.4	22.4	36.2
35	F	31.9	19.2	48.9
36-	M	51.2	13.7	35.1
55	F	56.3	14.3	29.4
56	M	53.0	16.7	30.3
and up	F	55.1	17.4	27.5

Table 3B

RESPONSE BY AGE AND SEX

(N=622)

Item 3

Woman as Ordained Local Elder

Frequency Distribution  
(expressed as percentages)

		<u>A T T I T U D E</u>		
<u>AGE</u>		<u>Unfavorable (0-3)</u>	<u>Neutral (4-6)</u>	<u>Favorable (7-10)</u>
16-	M	25.7	29.7	44.6
25	F	29.4	13.7	56.9
26-	M	41.4	25.9	32.7
35	F	36.2	21.3	42.5
36-	M	55.0	8.4	36.6
55	F	60.3	16.7	23.0
56	M	51.5	18.2	30.3
and up	F	52.2	13.0	34.8

Table 3C

RESPONSE BY AGE AND SEX

(N=622)

Item 5

Woman as Home-Church Local Elder

Frequency Distribution  
(expressed as percentages)

<u>AGE</u>		<u>A T T I T U D E</u>		
		<u>Unfavorable (0-3)</u>	<u>Neutral (4-6)</u>	<u>Favorable (7-10)</u>
16-	M	20.3	18.9	60.8
25	F	19.6	11.8	68.6
26-	M	36.2	20.7	43.1
35	F	27.7	21.3	51.0
36-	M	47.3	18.3	34.4
55	F	54.8	14.3	30.9
56	M	48.5	19.7	31.8
and up	F*	55.1	18.8	24.6

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\* Item left blank by one respondent

Table 3D  
 RESPONSE BY AGE AND SEX  
 (N=622)

Item 2

Woman in Pastoral Work

Frequency Distribution  
 (expressed as percentages)

A T T I T U D E

<u>AGE</u>	<u>Unfavorable (0-3)</u>	<u>Neutral (4-6)</u>	<u>Favorable (7-10)</u>
16- M	32.4	20.3	47.3
25 F	27.4	15.7	56.9
26- M	48.3	24.1	27.6
35 F	40.4	17.0	42.6
36- M	51.2	17.5	31.3
55 F	62.7	14.3	23.0
56 M	56.1	19.7	24.2
and up F*	59.4	17.4	21.7

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\* Item left blank by one respondent

Table 3E

## RESPONSE BY AGE AND SEX

(N=622)

## Item 4

Woman as Ordained MinisterFrequency Distribution  
(expressed as percentages)

<u>AGE</u>		<u>A T T I T U D E</u>		
		<u>Unfavorable</u> (0-3)	<u>Neutral</u> (4-6)	<u>Favorable</u> (7-10)
16-	M	35.1	18.9	46.0
25	F	25.5	19.6	54.9
26-	M	51.7	19.0	29.3
35	F	42.6	14.8	42.6
36-	M	59.5	8.4	32.1
55	F	67.5	15.1	17.4
55	M	60.6	16.7	22.7
and up	F	59.4	21.7	18.9

Table 3F  
 RESPONSE BY AGE AND SEX  
 (N=622)

Item 6

Woman as Home-Church Pastor

Frequency Distribution  
 (expressed as percentages)

		<u>A T T I T U D E</u>		
<u>AGE</u>		<u>Unfavorable (0-3)</u>	<u>Neutral (4-6)</u>	<u>Favorable (7-10)</u>
16-	M	39.2	18.9	41.9
25	F	29.4	19.6	51.0
26-	M	58.6	20.7	20.7
35	F	55.3	19.2	25.5
36-	M	59.5	14.5	26.0
55	F	69.8	15.9	14.3
56	M	57.6	16.7	25.7
and up	F	63.8	21.7	14.5

Table 4A

FEMALE SABBATH SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS  
 (N=43)  
 WIVES OF LOCAL ELDERS  
 (N=39)  
 WIVES OF PASTORS AND EVANGELISTS  
 (N=100)  
 WIVES OF CONFERENCE/UNION OFFICERS  
 (N=25)

Items 1, 3, 5

Women as Local Elders

Frequency Distribution  
 (expressed as percentages)

A T T I T U D E

<u>Item</u>	<u>Unfavorable (0-3)</u>	<u>Neutral (4-6)</u>	<u>Favorable (7-10)</u>	
1	SSS	60.5	18.6	20.9
	WLE	56.4	15.4	28.2
	WPE	52.0	10.0	38.0
	WO	52.0	8.0	40.0
3	SSS	55.8	18.6	25.6
	WLE	61.5	10.3	28.2
	WPE	53.0	12.0	35.0
	WO	52.0	12.0	36.0
5	SSS	58.1	9.3	32.6
	WLE	53.8	15.4	30.8
	WPE	48.0	16.0	36.0
	WO	56.0	12.0	32.0

Table 4B

FEMALE SABBATH SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS  
 (N=43)  
 WIVES OF LOCAL ELDERS  
 (N=39)  
 WIVES OF PASTORS AND EVANGELISTS  
 (N=100)  
 WIVES OF CONFERENCE/UNION OFFICERS  
 (N=25)

Items 2, 4, 6

Women in Pastoral Positions

Frequency Distribution  
 (expressed as percentages)

A T T I T U D E

<u>Item</u>	<u>Unfavorable (0-3)</u>	<u>Neutral (4-6)</u>	<u>Favorable (7-10)</u>
2 SSS	65.1	16.3	18.6
2 WLE	64.1	12.8	23.1
2 WPE	55.0	13.0	32.0
2 WO	60.0	28.0	12.0
4 SSS	60.5	23.2	16.3
4 WLE	61.5	18.0	20.5
4 WPE	61.0	15.0	24.0
4 WO	64.0	16.0	20.0
6 SSS	69.8	13.9	16.3
6 WLE	66.7	20.5	12.8
6 WPE	68.0	14.0	18.0
6 WO	68.0	24.0	8.0

Table 5

PASTORS AND EVANGELISTS

(N=121)

Items 1 -6

Frequency Distribution  
(expressed as percentages)

<u>Item</u>	<u>A T T I T U D E</u>		
	<u>Unfavorable (0-3)</u>	<u>Neutral (4-6)</u>	<u>Favorable (7-10)</u>
1	42.2	22.3	35.5
3	47.1	19.8	33.1
5	39.7	21.5	38.8
-----			
2	45.4	21.5	33.1
4	57.8	14.1	28.1
6	57.8	17.4	24.8

Table 6

CONFERENCE AND UNION OFFICERS

(N=33)

Items 1 - 6

Frequency Distribution  
(expressed as percentages)

<u>Item</u>	<u>A T T I T U D E</u>		
	<u>Unfavorable (0-3)</u>	<u>Neutral (4-6)</u>	<u>Favorable (7-10)</u>
1	51.5	27.3	21.2
3	66.7	9.1	24.2
5	48.5	30.3	21.2
-----			
2	54.6	24.2	21.2
4	72.7	3.0	24.3
6	69.7	15.2	15.1

Table 7

INSTITUTIONAL ADMINISTRATORS

(N=43)

Items 1 - 6

Frequency Distribution  
(expressed as percentages)

<u>Item</u>	<u>A T T I T U D E</u>		
	<u>Unfavorable</u> <u>(0-3)</u>	<u>Neutral</u> <u>(4-6)</u>	<u>Favorable</u> <u>(7-10)</u>
1	32.5	16.3	51.2
3	32.6	11.6	55.8
5	25.6	20.9	53.5
-----			
2	27.9	23.3	48.8
4	32.5	16.3	51.2
6	32.6	18.6	48.8

Table 8

DENOMINATIONAL EMPLOYEES (N=273)

and

LAY LEADERS (N=230)

Frequency Distribution  
(expressed as percentages)

		<u>A T T I T U D E</u>		
<u>Item</u>		<u>Unfavorable</u> (0-3)	<u>Neutral</u> (4-6)	<u>Favorable</u> (7-10)
1	DE	45.1	19.0	35.9
	LL	52.6	13.5	33.9
3	DE	47.6	17.2	35.2
	LL	53.0	12.6	34.4
5	DE*	40.6	20.9	38.2
	LL	50.4	14.8	34.8
-----				
2	DE*	48.3	20.5	30.8
	LL	57.8	16.5	25.7
4	DE	56.8	14.3	28.9
	LL	57.0	16.5	26.5
6	DE	56.4	19.4	24.2
	LL	64.3	15.7	20.0

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\* Item left blank by one respondent

Table 9

DESCRIPTION OF RESPONDENTS

(N=654)

Number of Respondents  
in Each Demographic  
Category

Denominational employee	273
Wife of denomination employee	117
Student	117
Local elder	113
Sabbath school superintendent	72
School Board	118
Other church office	213
Wife of local elder	39
Conference Committee	51
Lay Advistory Committee	32
Male	335
Female	295
Pastor	126
Evangelist	20
Pastor/Evangelist's wife	100
Officer	33
Officer's wife	25
Institutional administrator	43

Age

16-25	125
26-35	107
36-55	267
56 and up	141

Comments were made by 342 or 52.3% of the respondents.

Groups Surveyed With  
Number Mailed and Number Returned

<u>Group Surveyed</u>	<u>Est. No. in North America</u>	<u>Number Mailed</u>	<u>Number Returned</u>	<u>Return as % of Pop.</u>	<u>Returns % of Mailing</u>
Lay Leaders	25,802	300	230	0.9%	76.7%
Pastors & Evang.	3,000	150	121	4.0%	80.7%
Wives of Pastors and Evangelists	3,000	150	100	3.3%	66.7%
Conference and Union Presidents	71	24	33	46.5%	137.5%
Wives of Conference and Union Presidents	71	24	25	35.2%	104.2%
Bible Instructors	150	50	12 e	8.0%	24.0% e
Heads of Institutions	156	52	43	27.6%	86.0%
Youth	38,000 e	<u>206</u>	<u>90</u> e	0.2%	43.7%
Totals		956	654		68.4%

e - estimated