

Employing Blind Persons in Ministry within the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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As early as the Early Church of the New Testament, Apostle Paul advocated for a unity of believers without distinction between Jew or Greek, male or female, bond or free. In spite of this, certain groups in the Church have been slow to receive acceptance into the priesthood of all believers. As America's most diverse Christian denomination, however, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has made strides in the inclusion of women, youth, and certain minority groups into its ranks as pastors and administrative leaders. One category of the historically disenfranchised groups has lagged behind the others in terms of full inclusion into the workforce: the blind.

Visual Disabilities in America

In 2017, Cornell University published a study called the *American Community Survey* that collected data in a variety of areas, including disability statistics. This study determined that approximately 2.4% of the US population reported to have a visual disability. Persons 16 to 64 reported a lower level of visual disabilities (2.0%) than those 65 years of age and older (6.6%) (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2017).

While there is very little research on the topic of blind persons being employed in ministry, Erickson, Lee, and von Schrader (2017) examined the overall employment status of those with visual disabilities, reporting that:

The number of non-institutionalized persons aged twenty-one to sixty-four years with a visual disability in the United States who were employed full-time/full-year in 2016 was . . . 29.5%. Therefore, for working age adults reporting significant vision loss, over 70% are not employed full-time. (Erickson, Lee, &

von Schrader, 2017)

An older study conducted by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) revealed that visual disabilities (including blindness) to be among the top ten disabilities faced by adults 18 years of age or older (CDC, 2001).

Visual Disabilities in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

While there is no record of the number of legally or totally blind persons who are members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, one fact is clear: at present, there is not one totally blind person who is employed as a full-time pastor. Why is this the case? How does the Church hierarchy view this phenomenon, and to what extent is Church leadership open to the idea of hiring blind pastors when reasonable accommodations can be made? A research study was funded by the North American Division to address these and other questions.

Visual Disability: A Case in Point

Ray McAllister was born with vision problems, never seeing well enough to read without a magnifying glass. Yet during his adolescence, his eyes changed for the worse, and he lost his vision completely. However, in spite of these setbacks, McAllister felt called to join pastoral ministry from a young age. His family and friends affirmed this call, frequently telling McAllister that he should become a pastor.

As a teenager, McAllister saw clear fruit in the area of ministry. He had a strong knowledge of the Bible and biblical matters. He counseled other students, and in one case, walked alongside a student through her teen pregnancy and subsequent bout with postpartum depression. At the age of seventeen, McAllister preached his first sermon, focused on the topic of prayer; this sermon was well received by the congregation, which

included some of his peers. In college, psychological testing showed that McAllister showed an extremely strong leaning toward pastoral ministry. All indicators pointed McAllister in the direction of ministry.

During his first year in the seminary, McAllister received a clear, providential sign—in the form of an answered prayer—that affirmed his call to ministry. As he looked ahead at the coming years of education and their accompanying cost, he realized that he would be \$30,000 in debt from student loans when he graduated; this was a dizzying sum. McAllister prayed diligently about the matter, specifically asking God to resolve the debt problem by the end of the school year. If God did not make a clear path towards financial freedom, McAllister would view that as a sign from God that he was pursuing the wrong career, leave the seminary, and pursue another field of study.

Two days after laying his request before God, McAllister received a phone call from his grandmother. She told him that she had recently sold an estate and would be giving him the *exact* amount of money needed to cover his tuition. She had no knowledge of her grandson's prayer, but McAllister saw her contribution as a clear answer to his petition and an affirmation of his calling.

McAllister thus began to look for work as a pastor within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Conference president after conference president told him he had unique gifts and that they'd pray for him, yet no jobs appeared. Even after McAllister got married and demonstrated that he had a supportive spouse to help him, no jobs were offered to McAllister.

During one interview, a conference administrator admitted that it was unclear how a blind person could effectively function in a ministry role. McAllister welcomed the

honesty and invited the leader to submit (by email) three things that he did not believe a blind person could do within a ministry role. This would allow McAllister to respond with ideas how he, himself, would handle the situation. After a few emails back and forth with the church leader, correspondence trickled off. The exchange proved fruitless.

These experiences caused McAllister to enter a dark time of deep pain. While he struggled with his understanding of the human leaders of his denomination, he also became entangled in a spiritual battle. Finally, he realized there was only one way forward—forgiveness.

McAllister decided to return to school, earning a Ph.D. from Andrews University. However, even after earning his degree, he could not find full-time work in a teaching position, either.

Today, McAllister teaches distance education religion courses part-time and is a licensed massage therapist. He supplements his income by writing on the side. However, this is not the path to which McAllister feels he has been ultimately called. He still dreams of being able to serve the Lord as a pastor one day; however, as each year passes, his hopes lessen that his call will be fulfilled.

His plaintive poem below expresses the hurt and deep disappointment he feels at being overlooked for hire, solely based on a handicap over which he had no control. Failure to be considered was felt more acutely because of the extensive preparation he invested in pursuit of what he considers a calling from God.

Buried Talent
(Matthew 25:14-30)

I am the buried talent.
I am the one

That gets hidden away
Pushed to the side
Because the steward
Entrusted with me
Does not know what to do with me.
I am worth my weight in gold
As precious as what the other stewards are given
And yet I am treated
As though I were dead
Or didn't even exist.
And so I wait
For the Master to return
And look upon my lowly situation
And move me
Into the keeping
Of one who will respect me
And put me to use
To make a difference
For the Kingdom.
- Ray McAllister

In the final Day of Judgment, will the Church be held accountable for burying the talents of blind persons who are overlooked for employment? Should it be? Is blindness a condition that makes church leadership untenable, if not impossible? What are sentiments of Church leaders?

Ideas about Employing Blind Persons in Ministry Study

In 2019, the Institute of Church Ministry, on behalf of the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church, conducted a research study entitled *Ideas about Employing Blind Persons in Ministry*; the goal of this study was to learn more about conference administrators' views regarding the employment of blind persons in ministry within the Church. Specifically, the study sought to understand administrators' perceptions of those with visual disabilities, as well as their attitudes towards employing blind people in ministry.

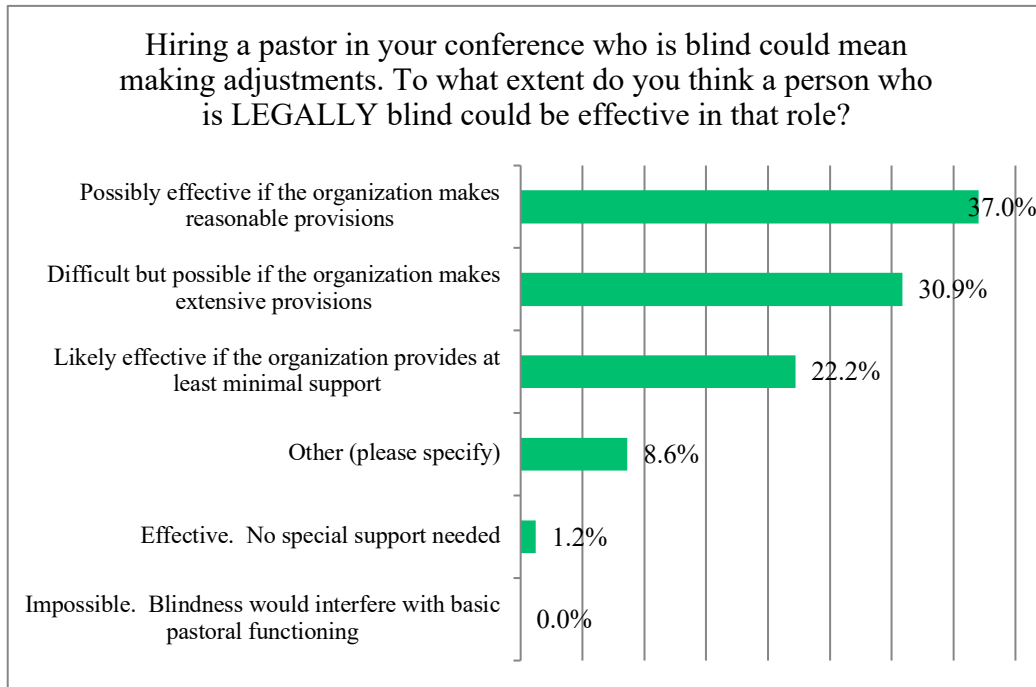
This study showed that conference administrators generally have a sympathetic attitude towards blind people. Additionally, most administrators (more than 80%) had some form of experience with totally blind persons, either through casual relationships (42.0%), special events (such as blind camp) (23.5%), close friendships (12.4%), or very close friendships/family relationships (6.2%). Yet when asked if they had experiences with a blind person who was truly successful, participants were divided: 53.16% of respondents felt they had experienced a blind person who was successful, while the remaining 46.84% did not have such an experience.

Overall, conference administrators showed a lack of workplace experience regarding employment and development of persons with significant physical handicaps, including blindness. Most (85%) of the administrators surveyed had little to no experience employing blind persons. Additionally, only 2.5% had received an application from a blind person, 2.5% had interviewed a blind person, and 6.3% had hired a blind person.

Conference administrators seemed more confident in the employment potential of a legally blind person over a totally blind person. When asked if a legally blind person could be successful in a pastoral position, respondents felt such a person would likely be successful if the organization provided at least minimal support (22.2%), difficult but possible if the organization made extensive provisions (30.9%), or possibly effective if the organization made reasonable provisions (37.0%) (see Table 1).

Table 1

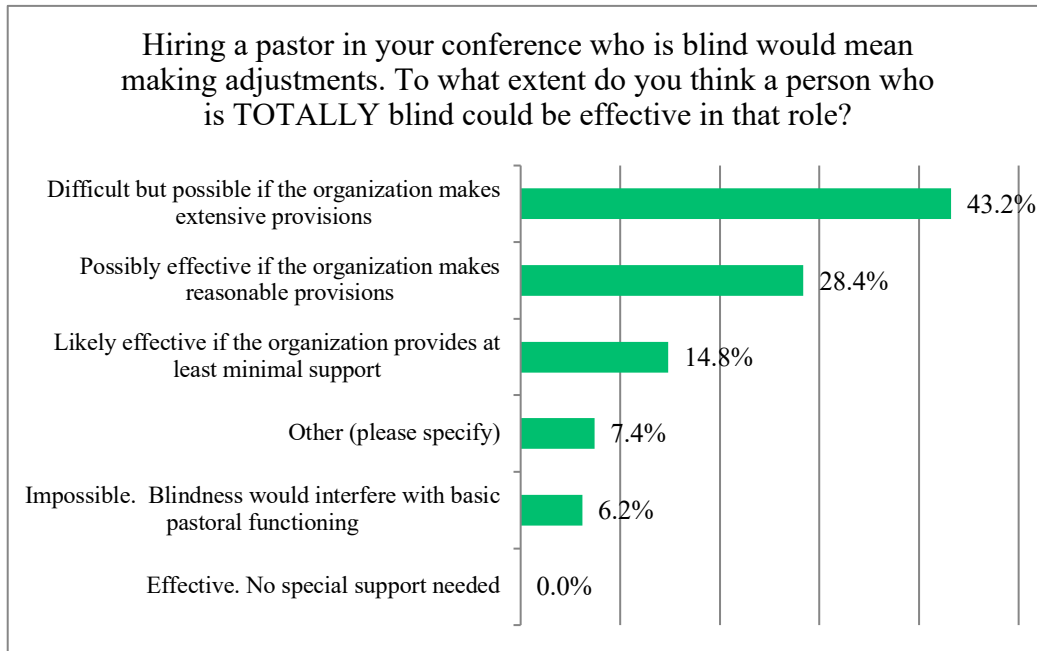
Effectiveness in Ministry–Legally Blind



When asked the same question regarding hiring someone who was totally blind, respondents indicated that they felt such a person would be likely be successful if the organization provided at least minimal support (14.8%), possibly effective if the organization made reasonable provisions (28.4%), or difficult but possible if the organization made extensive provisions (43.2%) (see Table 2). However, none of the administrators felt it would be impossible for a legally or totally blind person to fulfill this role.

Table 2

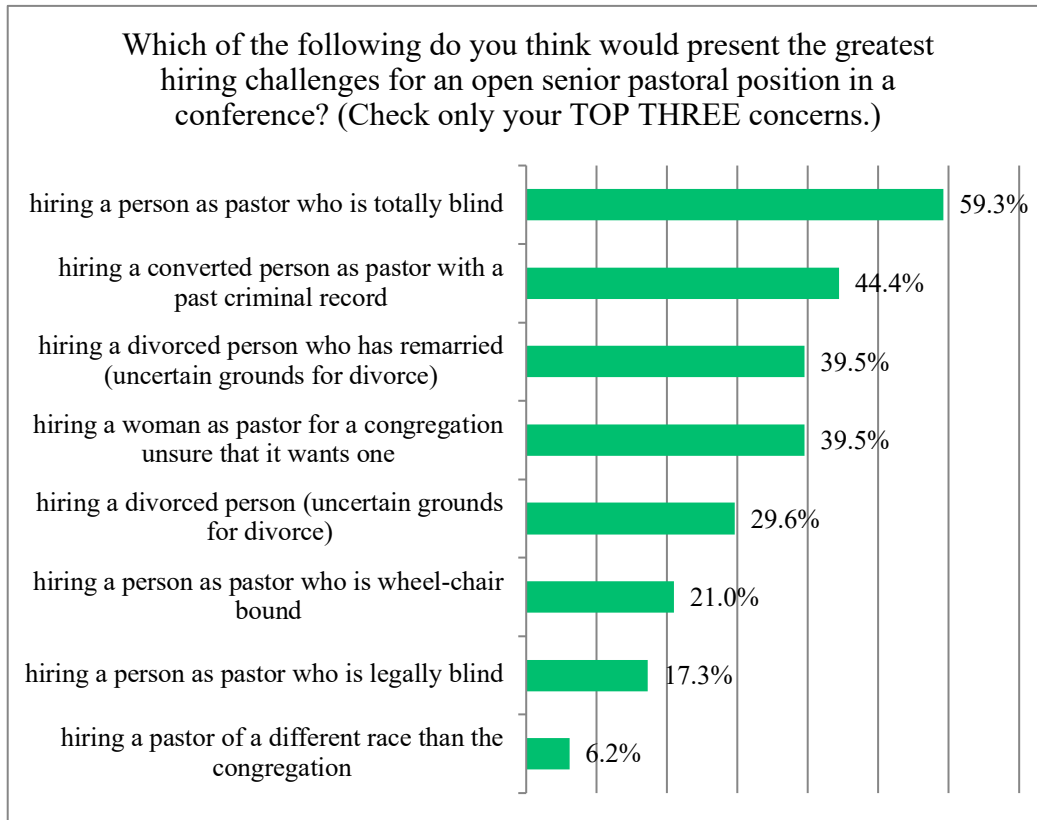
Effectiveness in Ministry–Totally Blind



When presented with potentially challenging hiring situations, administrators ranked hiring a pastor who is totally blind as the greatest hiring challenge (59.3%) out of all scenarios given, more difficult than hiring a converted person with a past criminal record (44.4%), hiring a divorced person who has remarried (39.5%), hiring a woman pastor for a congregation unsure that it wants one (39.5%), hiring a divorced person (29.6%), hiring a person who is chair-bound (21.0%), hiring a legally blind person (17.3%), or hiring a pastor from a different race than the congregation (6.2%) (see Table 3).

Table 3

Greatest Hiring Challenges



Why do conference administrators feel that hiring a totally blind person would present such a challenge? The greatest concern of the administrators seems to be related to transportation/mobility of the pastor. The leaders expressed concern that the person would not be able to transition easily to other places or jobs as needed (59.3%).

Additional concerns included that he or she may need more resources than the conference could afford (50.6%), that the blind person might not be accepted by the congregation (48.2%), and that blind person would not be as effective as a person with sight (35.8%).

Overall, there appears to be a lack of knowledge among conference administrators regarding employment and development of persons with significant physical handicaps.

Less than 4% say they have extensive knowledge on this topic, while most (45.7%)

indicated that they have limited knowledge. However, while the current knowledge level is low, conference administrators indicated an openness to learn.

Research from Other Denominations

McAllister, himself, conducted research regarding the employment of totally blind pastors from other denominations. While the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the North American Division does not currently employ any blind (legally or totally) pastors, other denominations do. These pastors shared with McAllister that they have found ways to navigate the obstacles caused by their lack of sight.

While the 2019 survey showed that church administrators in the Adventist Church seemed most concerned about transportation issues, blind pastors in other denominations shared that they utilized transportation services, such as Uber and Lyft, to get around, or they would find volunteers in their churches to help. Some pastors also shared that their spouse was willing to help.

McAllister discovered in his interviews that blind pastors in other denominations were open and honest about their inability to pick up on visual cues. However, the interviewees shared that they simply tell people that they need to be clear with words in communicating, and people are. The lack of reading visual cues does not seem to cause a problem in their ministry.

Interestingly, McAllister's found that in several instances, the blind pastors shared that their blindness actually gave them opportunities to more successfully serve. They shared that their blindness gave them the chance to discover—on a deeper level—more about people's spiritual lives and situation and provided a unique way to connect.

In an interview shared on the Key Ministry website, Maureen Pranghofer (who is blind herself) affirmed these sentiments:

God has used my blindness to others in so many ways. In my ability as a songwriter, I'm able to describe things in a deeper way than people who can see. I show people trust-in-action as I follow other people's directions. Most of all, I think I'm able to show people that, despite my being totally blind and using a power wheelchair, there is still joy. (Jamieson, 2019)

Recommendations

The *Ideas about Employing Blind Persons in Ministry* report offered church administrators within the Seventh-day Adventist Church three recommendations in regards to hiring blind persons for pastoral ministry:

- **Continue research with a benchmark study.** This recommendation involves identifying denominations or religious organizations that employ blind persons and learn from their experience, focusing mainly on best practices, policies, and pitfalls as they handle transportation issues. The study could also include learning about internationally accepted inclusion principles and policies from experts in the field such as Handicap International and other specialized organizations working with people with disabilities.
- **Learning opportunities for administrators.** Administrators should be more thoroughly educated on issues related to employment of persons with disabilities. A potential learning opportunity might include informal dialogue/conversation between conference administrators and blind persons seeking employment opportunities with the Adventist Church with the purpose to know more about their aspirations, their needs, and what they have to offer considering their

disability. This would potentially help discard misconceptions and stereotypes regarding blind persons.

- **Set a goal.** Encourage conferences to set a modest target for hiring the blind, just as the NAD does for other categories of persons (women, youth, and minorities) with gifts but limited opportunity.

Conclusion

In 1952, an article entitled “The Blind Pastor of Manhattan” was published in the *Saturday Evening Post*. This piece told the remarkable story of John Urich, a man born blind to a working-class family in Kansas. Like McAllister, Urich felt called from a young age to become a minister. However, by the time he was college age, he had been repeatedly discouraged from ministry due to his blindness. As such, he studied to be a social worker, a profession that would still allow him to help people. Before graduating, he married a girl named Carol, who also happened to be blind.

In 1942, Urich packed a suitcase and his life savings (all of \$45) and headed to Washington, D.C. to find a job. After some searching, he found a job as a typist with a government agency. In spite of the job bringing in a good, steady income, Urich still yearned to become active in church work, and in 1947, he entered the seminary. After graduating, he was appointed as the pastor of Grace and St. Paul’s Lutheran Church on West 71st Street in New York City for a trial period.

Urich proved to be a strong speaker. Said one congregant, “It is often the Pastor who sees—and we who are blind.” When it came to navigating his surroundings, Urich found a way to make things work. He carefully rehearsed his path between the pulpit to the rear door where he greeted his congregants, had a subway map created in braille so he

could conduct home visits, and employed a seeing eye dog to help him get around. Urich was committed to keeping his blindness from interfering with his ministry.

When his trial period was over, church administrators conducted a vote of the congregation to determine if Urich should remain in his pastoral position at Grace and St. Paul's. When the votes had all been tallied, the president turned to Urich and said,

As president of this church it is my duty to inform you of the pleasure of this congregation in regards to your status as our pastor. We have tabulated the votes and we find that not one single vote has been cast against you. You are our pastor by unanimous acclaim. (Hotchner, 1952)

We hope and pray that in the near future, the same can be said to visually impaired and blind ministry applicants of every denomination.

Author's note: To contact Ray McAllister directly, he can be reached via e-mail at raymcal@att.net.

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