

# ***CHURCH SECRETARIES SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES***

## **Who They Are and What They Do**

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**BACKGROUND** For nearly thirty years, the author has headed a theological institution which specializes in the post-ordination advanced training of clergy and ministry professionals. During that time, over two thousand clergy have gone through a three-year degree course of study and a large majority of them have had secretaries working for them in the process. It was this phenomenon of church secretaries working for clergy who were advancing their own training which caught the author's attention. Who are these people, these secretaries? What do we know about them as a professional body? What are their skills, their talents, their tasks, their aspirations? When I asked these questions to the clergy students at my institution, they were consistently unable to provide answers which satisfied. These secretaries, attending to the clergy and seeing after the daily business affairs of the church, seemed not to have been paid much attention to themselves. Over the years, interest in this seemingly ignored or taken-for-granted group of professionals continued to loom in my mind and finally culminated in this national study.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY** Two major challenges were confronted in this endeavor, namely, creating the research instrument (i.e., the questionnaire) and identifying the respondents. The research instrument was relatively easy and, with standard social scientific practices, rather straightforward. The identifying of respondents was extremely easy as a random generic data-base of church addresses selected from around the country was readily available. The data-base was neither geographically nor denominationally specific. The research agenda simply called for a random national sampling of churches without any other specifications. The research resulted in one thousand secretaries being questioned by use of the survey instrument. The questionnaire itself was divided unequally into four categories of enquiry consisting of 90 questions -- Personal Information, Job Description, Faith Community, and Personal Aspirations.

**NOMENCLATURE (Church/Pastor/Secretary/Question/Questionnaire)** The question of terms always appears in data-base studies like this one and practical and even pragmatic decisions have to be made. The sooner those decisions are stated clearly, the soon problems are avoided. Because the random sample was not denominationally-specific, we have determined to use the word "church" throughout as the generic term for what otherwise might be called the parish, the congregation, or the faith community. "Church secretary" seems the simplest and clearest term and "church" covers all groupings of worshippers in most Christian communities. Also, we have chosen to use the term "pastor" to convey both the clergy person in charge of the church and the individual to whom the secretary answers and for whom she works. Incidentally, since ALL of the respondents were women, we will use the feminine pronoun throughout in all references to the secretary. Finally, we have used the word "question" to refer to the "information unit enquiry" and "questionnaire" for the "research instrument." Since we are writing for the general public and not social researchers, we are employing "question" and "questionnaire" as the operative terms for "information unit enquiry" and "research instrument."

**PRESENTATION** In the following, we have chosen to shorten the information units to as few

a words as necessary to convey the nature of the enquiry, so, for example, instead of printing out what was on the questionnaire as “What is your gender?”, we have simply put “Gender” as the information unit, and throughout the survey summary we have used this approach. When total percentages of response to a particular question does not reach 100%, this indicates the absence of a response on the part of the responding secretary. Happily, this happened only infrequently. Fortunately, only in two instances out of 90 have we chosen to void the question owing to limited response. As the data more or less speaks for itself, what has been done in the following is a brief recitation and summary of each category of information with only the rarest of speculative observations drawn from the data itself. The reader is at liberty to extend the data analysis and interpretation as one might see fit. We are more interested in sharing the information than in proposing some grand scheme of interpretation, striving to answer the driving question of this study, namely, “Church secretaries, who are they and what do they do?”

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1. Gender                | 96 % female   |
| 2. Ethnicity             | 99% white   |
| 3. Home location         | 85% midwestern  |
| 4. Church location       | 25% city 45% small town 30% rural                             |
| 5. Age                   | 53% (51 or over) 47% (under 50)                               |
| 6. Education             | 29% HS 38% some college 30% degree                            |
| 7. Religious Affiliation | 26% RC 33% UMC 27% Lutheran                                   |
| 8. Parents’ Profession   | 35% blue collar 1% pastor 64% white collar                    |
| 9. Marital Status        | 82% married 10% single 6% widowed 2% divorced                 |
| 10. Children             | 2.6 children  |
| 11. Spouse’s employment  | 11% retired 33% blue collar 4% pastor<br>4% white collar      |
| 12. Spouse’s education   | 27% HS 21% some 25% college graduate                          |
| 13. Annual income        | 33% \$10,000 31% \$20,000 36% over \$20,000                   |
| 14. Total family income  | 33% under \$30 11% \$30 14% \$40 11% \$50<br>9% \$60 11% \$70 |

COMMENTS: Based on information gleaned from a nationally representative random sampling of one thousand secretaries, nearly all are white middle aged (50+) women with some college or a degree whose parents were blue collar workers. They have on average three children. Better than half of them have a personal annual income of \$20,000.00 or less and one out of four have a family income of \$40,000.00 or less. Better than eight in ten are married.

## JOB DESCRIPTION

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 15. Job title                     | 59% secretary 21% office admin. 20% other                       |
| 16. Served under another pastor   | 63% YES 37% NO  |
| 17. Gender of present pastor      | 86% male 14% female   |
| 18. Served under different gender | 73% NO 26% YES  |
| 19. Years in present position     | 6.9 avg.  |
| 20. Previous job                  | 18% secretary 51% blue collar 31% none                          |
| 21. Hours paid weekly             | 38% 40hrs 20% under 30 hrs 15% under 15 hrs<br>27% under 10 hrs |
| 22. Unpaid hours weekly           | 18 hours average  |

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|---|---------------|------------|
| 23. Paid vacation                                 | 63% YES       | 36% NO     |
| 24. If YES, how many weeks                        | 2.3 weeks avg |            |
| 25. Does your job provide a retirement plan       | 69% NO        | 30% YES    |
| 26. Do Sunday worship bulletin                    | 92% YES       | 8% NO      |
| 27. Do church newsletter                          | 68% YES       | 29% NO     |
| 28. Maintain church address data-base on computer | 91% YES       | 9% NO      |
| 29. Use formal title when addressing pastor       | 63% YES       | 37% NO     |
| 30. If YES, what is it                            | 46% Pastor    | 15% Father |

COMMENTS: Nearly six in ten church secretaries are called “secretary” and better than three out of five have served under more than one pastor of whom over four out of five were male pastors. At the time of this study, they had served nearly seven years in their present position. Just over half held blue collar jobs, not secretarial, prior to becoming the church secretary and nearly four out of ten work a full forty hour week. They also averaged an additional eighteen hours of unpaid time spent as church secretary. Better than six in ten have a paid vacation which averages just over two weeks annually but nearly seven in ten have no paid retirement plan. Nearly all prepare the church worship bulletin but less than seven in ten do a church newsletter. Nearly all maintain an electronic data-base of church membership and six in ten use a formal title for their employer/clergy with nearly half using the term “Pastor.”

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|--|-------------------|--------------------------|
| 31. Keep pastor’s appointment book                 | 16% YES           | 84% NO                   |
| 32. Answer directly to pastor                      | 85% YES           | 15% NO                   |
| 33. If NO, to whom                                 | VOID              |                          |
| 34. Attend church where you work                   | 71% YES           | 29% NO                   |
| 35. Member of church governing body                | 25% YES           | 75% NO                   |
| 36. If YES, do you serve as secretary to that body | 30% YES           | 70% NO                   |
| 37. Week salary                                    | \$785.00 weekly   |                          |
| 38. Paid hourly                                    | 60% YES           | 37% NO                   |
| 39. If YES, hourly rate                            | \$9.80 hourly     |                          |
| 40. Employer pay Social Security                   | 70% YES           | 24% NO                   |
| 41. Employ provide health benefits                 | 28% YES           | 72% NO                   |
| 42. Office of your own                             | 70% YES           | 28% NO                   |
| 43. Use computer                                   | 99% YES           |                          |
| 44. On the internet in office                      | 85% YES           | 15% NO                   |
| 45. Use software for managing office               | 61% YES           | 36% NO                   |
| 46. If YES, what                                   | 6% Church Windows | 10% MS/options 84% other |

COMMENTS: Though better than eight in ten answer directly to the pastor, less than one in five actually keep the pastor’s appointment book. Over seven in ten attend church where they work and a quarter of church secretaries serve on the church governing body but only one in ten of that number serve as secretary to the governing body. The average church secretary salary is \$785.00 weekly and they are paid normally by the hour at an average hourly rate of \$9.80. While 70% of the churches pay Social Security less than three in ten provide health benefits. All respondents use the computer and almost all are on the internet in the office of which seven in ten have an office to themselves. Of the three in five who use office software, no single software brand is used by more than one in ten of the secretaries surveyed.

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|---|---------|--------|
| 47. Answer all in-coming calls to church office | 77% YES | 23% NO |
|---|---------|--------|

|  |         |        |
|--|---------|--------|
| 48. Have photocopier   | 97% YES |        |
| 49. Words per minute on keyboard                                 | 62 WPM  |        |
| 50. Communicate with pastor via internet                         | 32% YES | 68% NO |
| 51. Church have website  | 70% YES | 30% NO |
| 52. Communicate with church members via internet                 | 73% YES | 27% NO |
| 53. Church newsletter sent via internet                          | 19% YES | 77% NO |
| 54. Church newsletter on website                                 | 29% YES | 65% NO |
| 55. Specific training as church secretary                        | 14% YES | 86% NO |
| 56. Employer pay for skills training                             | 37% YES | 47% NO |
| 57. You provide referral service for call-ins needing counseling | 51% YES | 44% NO |
| 58. You provide on-phone counseling                              | 31% YES | 58% NO |

COMMENTS: Four out of five church secretaries answer all in-coming calls to the church while nearly all have a photocopier at their disposal. They type at an average rate of 62 words per minute. Only three in ten communicate with their pastor via e-mail while better than seven in ten communicate with members of the church via the internet. Seven in ten churches have a website which is maintained but not designed by the secretary. As noted earlier, nearly nine in ten church secretaries have had no specific training for the job they hold. However, nearly four in ten churches pay for skills training to those who desire it. Just over half of the secretaries surveyed provide referral services to call-ins needing counseling while three in ten say they actually offer on-phone counseling.

|   |           |        |
|---|-----------|--------|
| 59. Church have religious education director    | 63% YES   | 35% NO |
| 60. If YES, are you the DRE secretary as well   | 19% YES   | 52% NO |
| 61. DRE have college degree                     | 45% YES   | 18% NO |
| 62. You handle reports to denominational office | 69% YES   | 25% NO |
| 63. Do you handle accounting records            | 33% YES   | 66% NO |
| 64. You have formal accounting training         | 27% YES   | 71% NO |
| 65. You type pastor's sermons                   | 2% YES    | 95% NO |
| 66. Handle pastor's correspondence              | 49% YES   | 49% NO |
| 67. Staff size at your job                      | 5.3 STAFF |        |
| 68. Title for other than pastor and secretary   | VOID      |        |

COMMENTS: While six in ten churches have a religious education director, nearly 20% of the church secretaries serve as secretary to the religious education director as well. Less than half of the DREs have a college degree while, as noted earlier, 30% of the church secretaries have a degree. Nearly seven in ten secretaries handle the denominational reporting and over three in ten handle the accounting records of the church though only 27% have any accounting training. Virtually none type the pastor's sermons but half handle his/her correspondence. Of the one thousand churches surveyed, the average staff size was just over five salaried persons which includes the secretary and pastor while in most cases the remaining staff were the DRE, music director, and custodian.

### **FAITH COMMUNITY (CHURCH)**

|   |                |
|---|----------------|
| 69. Membership of your church             | 884 average    |
| 70. Average Sunday attendance             | 1,086 average  |
| 71. Size of city/town                     | 76,000 average |
| 72. Church Members understand what you do | 57% YES 29% NO |
| 73. Are you appreciated by church         | 83% YES        |

|  |              |        |
|--|--------------|--------|
| 74. Teach Sunday School                          | 13% YES      | 85% NO |
| 75. Annual church budget                         | \$326,407.00 |        |
| 76. Total income package of pastor               | \$58,450.00  |        |
| 77. Personally involved in church where you work | 75% YES      | 21% NO |
| 78. Do more than attend worship                  | 75% YES      | 25% NO |
| 79. Pastor access you after hours                | 75% YES      | 25% NO |
| 80. Congregation access you after hours          | 64% YES      | 34% NO |
| 81. Called by Pastor after hours                 | 24% YES      | 74% NO |
| 82. Called by members of church after hours      | 22% YES      | 76% NO |
| 83. Church provide skills training payment       | 31% YES      | 58% NO |

COMMENTS: In cities averaging 75,000 population, the churches served by the secretaries covered in this survey average nearly 900 members with better than a weekly attendance of one thousand. While better than eight in ten secretaries say they are appreciated by the church, less than six in ten believe members of their church community understand what all they do as church secretary. And, in addition to serving as church secretary, better than one in ten actually teach Sunday school class as well. While the pastor's income package reaches nearly \$60,000.00, the church budget is just over \$325,000.00. The church secretaries are 75% of the time likely to both attend worship where they serve as secretary and participate in church activities as well. Also, 75% of the time their pastor calls upon their services after hours while better than six in ten members of the church do. The church does provide for paid skills training for secretaries who are interested.

#### PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS

|  |                          |        |
|--|--------------------------|--------|
| 84. Desire college degree                  | 17% YES                  | 67% NO |
| 85. Further skills-based training desired  | 42% YES                  | 49% NO |
| 86. If YES, what                           | 35% More Computer Skills |        |
| 87. Ever considered entering ministry      | 4% YES                   | 92% NO |
| 88. Desire your children to enter ministry | 22% YES                  | 66% NO |
| 89. Considering leaving for secular work   | 29% YES                  | 66% NO |
| 90. If YES, what                           | 4% account               |        |

COMMENTS: Of those not holding college degrees, only 17% say they actually desire a college education though better than four in ten do desire further skills-based training, particularly in computer skills. My own institution has designed a "degree-completion" program for church secretaries who have five years of on-the-job experience leading to a Bachelor of Business Administration for church secretaries desiring to advance professionally. Though they say they have hardly ever considered entering the ministry themselves, one in five church secretaries desire their children to consider ministry as a profession. Satisfaction with the job is not so bad though nearly three in ten do consider leaving church secretarial work for secular employment. If they do leave, they prefer accounting to any other job.

#### VALUE AND RELEVANCE OF THIS STUDY WITH CONCLUDING REMARKS

When one considers that, more often than not, it is the church secretary rather than the pastor or another staff person who functions as the face and voice of the church. She answers the phone and addresses the questions posed to her. She handles the paperwork of the church, creates and prints the bulletins and newsletters, fields, sorts, and distributes questions and concerns coming in through the electronic media and the post, and does all of this and more with a

minimum of formal training and a very low level of financial compensation with few or no benefits attached to her service.

Everyone in the church seems to have an opinion about the church secretary, who she is and what she should be doing. Until this national study was conducted, there had not been a single data-base study published which consisted of questions actually posed to the secretaries themselves. Rather than simply speculating about who they are and what they do, we set out to find out from them personally who they are and what they do. This information, then, is directly from the church secretaries themselves, not their employers, their pastors, or their co-workers. They speak for themselves in this study.

As nearly as possible, this research was entered into with an open mind and with every expectation that the survey would give a clear picture of the church secretary. What we have found should inform church employment committees and the clergy generally as to who these individuals are and what they do. If church committees find themselves more understanding and supportive of these professionals, then the effort expended in developing this national study will have been justified.

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