

Andrews University
Institute of Church Ministry

**SURVEY ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN ELDERS
IN THE NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION**

**A Research Study Commissioned by the North American
Division of Seventh-day Adventists**

by

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Background

"In 1973 the General Conference Committee established an ad hoc Committee on the role of women in the church. The Annual Council that year voted 'that continued study be given to the theological soundness of the election of women to local church offices which require ordination' and 'that in areas receptive to such action, there be continued recognition of the appropriateness of appointing women to pastoral evangelistic work.'"¹

In 1975 at the Spring meeting of the General Conference Committee a vote was taken "that the greatest discretion and caution be exercised in the ordination of women to the office of local church elder."² "In 1984 the Annual Council voted to 'advise each division that it is free to make provision as it may deem necessary for the election and ordination of women as local church elders.' The Council also voted certain precautions and guidelines that should be carefully followed in implementing such a plan."³

During the period of time from 1973 to 1984 the church has "felt free to open the door for the ordination of women as local church elders. By 1984 this possibility, which was at first limited to the North American Division, was extended to the world church, as each division should see its way clear to proceed."⁴

In 1988 the North American Division officers wanted to determine the effect on the Division of the decision to allow women to serve as local church elders. They asked the Institute of Church Ministry (ICM) at Andrews University to develop a questionnaire which

¹Wilson, Neal, *ADVENTIST REVIEW*, May 12, 1988, p. 6.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

would help them discover the following information: (1) The number of female elders and male elders in the North American Division, (2) the number of women elders in each church related to the number of men elders in each church, (3) the size and type, including predominate culture, of churches where female elders serve, (4) the total number of years women have served as elders in each church, (5) attitudes of churches toward female elders and (6) values or problems female elders have brought to the local church.

Description of the Study

The research was conducted by the Institute of Church Ministry for the administration of the North American Division. It was determined that since no total list of women elders within the division was in existence, it was necessary to do research on the total population of churches within the North American Division (NAD). The mailing labels to "pastor" of each of the 4,444 churches within the NAD were obtained from the General Conference to form the statistical basis for drawing the research data.

The survey instrument, "Survey on Status of Women Elders," was developed by ICM. It consisted of 50 variables in three parts. The first variables pertained to the demographic information. The second part of the questionnaire was to be filled out by churches with female elders. The third part of the questionnaire was to be filled out only by churches which did not have female elders. The final section of the questionnaire welcomed write-in comments from each respondent. Refer to appendix for a copy of the instrument.

Along with the questionnaire the pastors were sent a letter of explanation asking that in the absence of the pastor, the questionnaire be filled out by a member of the board of elders or the church secretary. A stamped, addressed envelope was included to encourage

immediate response. Those not responding within three weeks were sent a second packet. At the time of the second mailing, each church name which indicated it was predominately a Spanish-speaking congregation was sent a copy of the questionnaire translated into the Spanish language.

Altogether 3331 surveys were returned. Of those, 63 surveys were unusable because churches had merged, disbanded, closed, or the survey was inadequately filled in. Of significance is the fact that 232 surveys were returned by the postmaster as non-deliverables. While it is an accepted fact that people frequently move, the ICM staff questioned the fact that 232 churches would have moved without the General Conference mailing room being notified of a change of address. The mail room was sent a copy of all returned non-deliverable envelopes.

The research population of usable surveys was 3,036 or a 73% return rate which is considered excellent for mail surveys of this magnitude and reflects the strong interest of Adventist pastors in the subject. Adding to the interest was the fact that the first World Commission on Women meeting in Washington, D.C. was to take place just a few weeks after most pastors received their survey on women elders.

Although there was no connection between the Division's interest in the decision to allow local churches to ordain female elders and the World Commission to consider the issues concerning ordaining female pastors, the fact that the publicity of the discussions of ordination of women was widespread heightened the pastors' interest in the subject and may account for the extremely high response rate in the write-in section of the "Survey on Status of Women Elders." Many pastors welcomed the opportunity to be included in a discussion of female ordination. As one pastor put it "We are the guys who in the end have

to live with the decision of a commission or committee and make it work with our members."

The questions and response percentages are presented in graph form. For ease in comparison of questions having the agree/disagree options, the two "agree" and the two "disagree" categories have been combined. The extent to which these two figures fail to total 100 percent for any given statement represents the "uncertain" choice. In the section for churches which have female elders (section I, F and G), the tabulations are only for those churches. Therefore percentages of agreement and disagreement reflect only those congregations with female elders and not the Division at large.

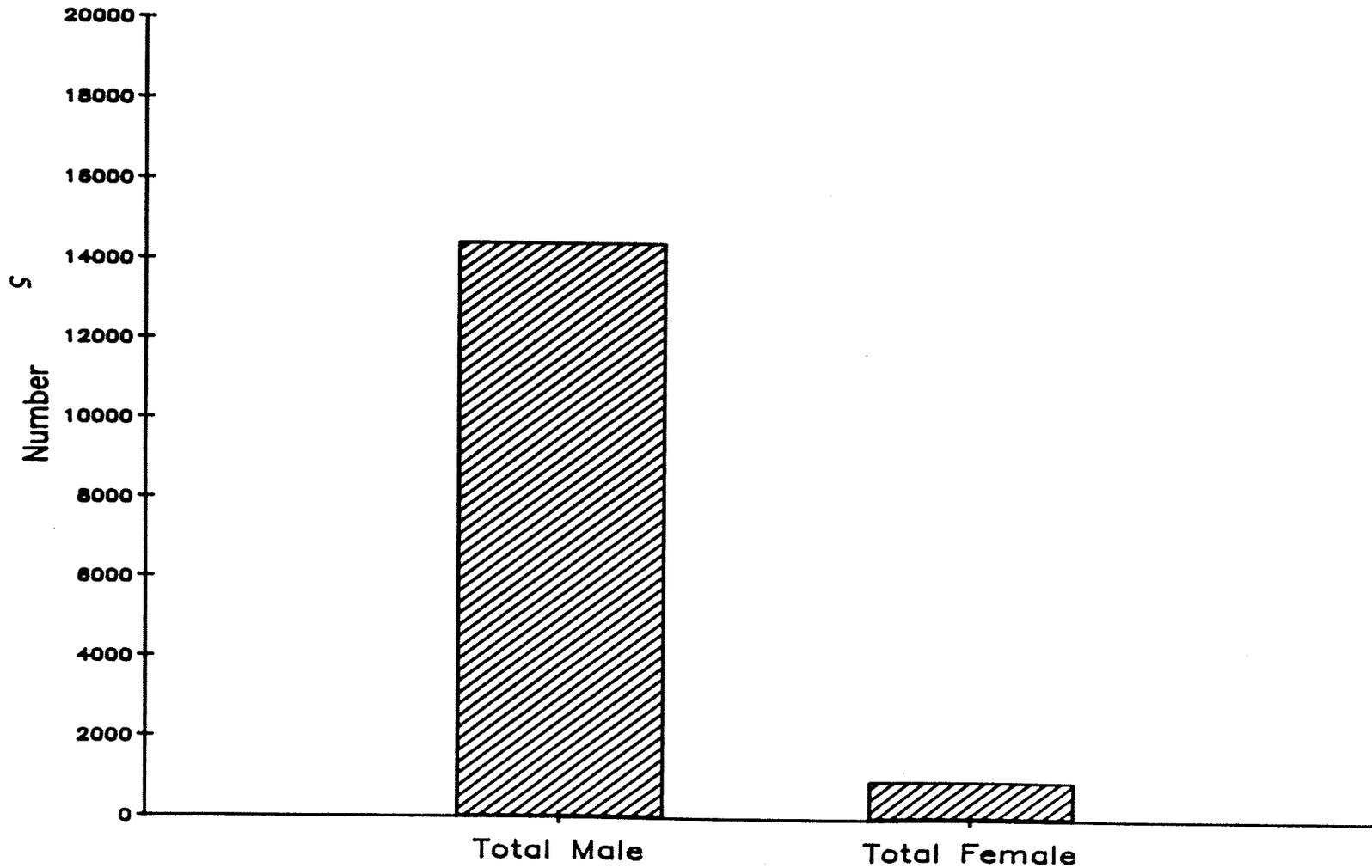
The write-in comments will be briefly discussed in this study. However, due to the large volume of responses and to the volatile nature of many of the responses at both ends of a spectrum of favoring and not favoring ordination of women, a team of behavioral scientists has been asked to further analyze the qualitative data to help give direction to the Division administration as they develop a forum for further discussion on the topic.

Total Number of Elders

The total number of male elders serving the 3,036 churches which responded is 14,495. The total number of female elders serving within those same churches is 960 (See graph #1).

Of the 3,036 churches responding the 960 female elders can be found in 457 churches. That indicates that 2,579 or 85% of the churches which responded do not have female elders. The ratio of male elders to female elders in the Division is 15 males to 1 female.

A comparison of the total number
male and female elders
n=15,455



GRAPH 1

The questionnaire asked for the number of male and female "head" elders. More than one respondent pointed out that the Church Manual does not provide for a "head elder" but rather prefers the term "first elder." For the sake of consistency, ICM will report the findings under the term "head elder" because it was so asked in the survey instrument, although "first elder" is indeed the preferred term. The total number of male head elders reported was 3,011 for the Division. Females serving as head elders number 66 for a Division ratio of 46 to 1. The total number of male assistant head elders is 2,026. Females serving as assistant head elders total 81 for a Division ratio of 25 to 1 (See graph #2).

Years Women Have Served NAD Churches as Local Elders

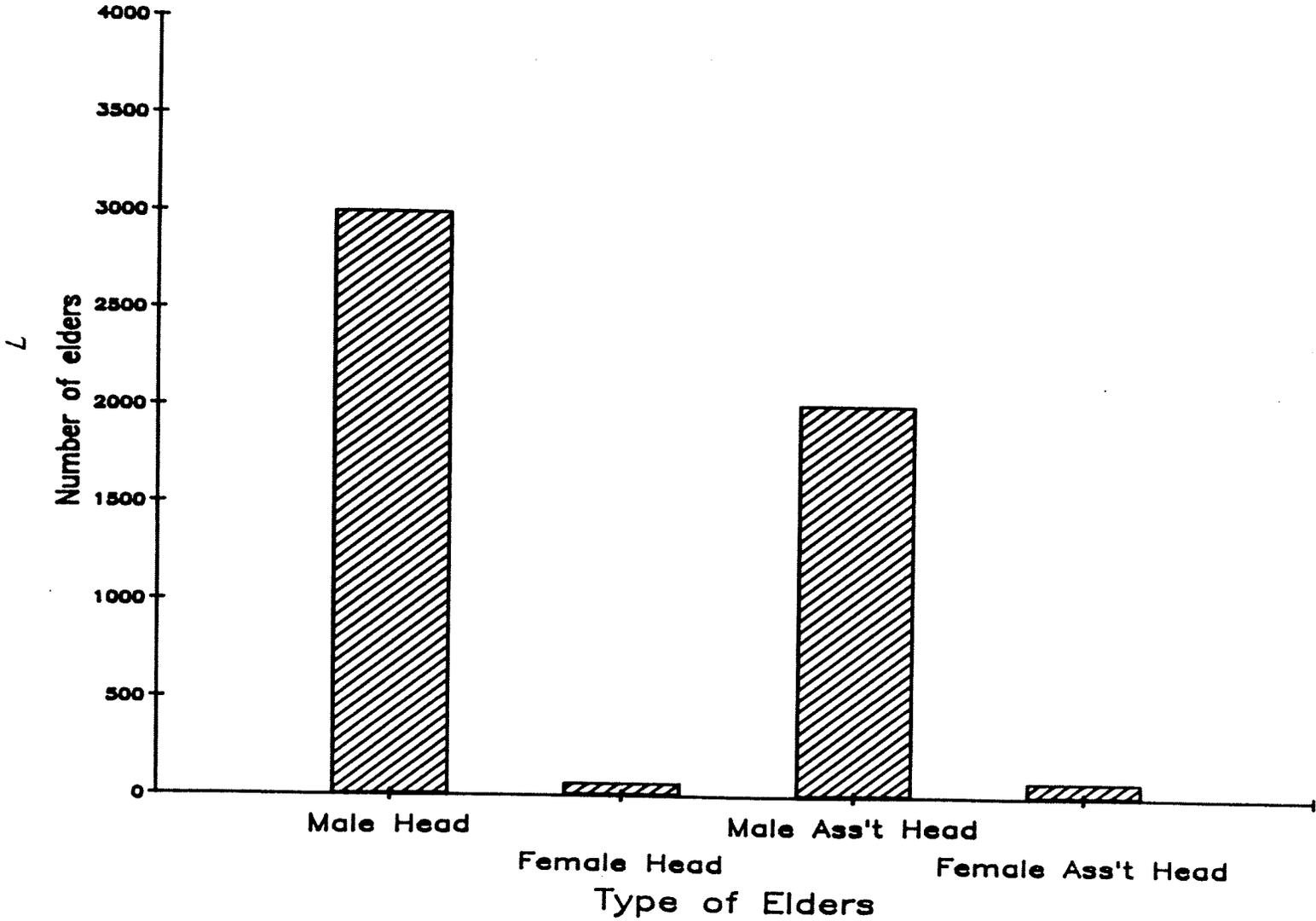
Of interest is the length of time women elders have been serving as local church elders (see graph #3). One church has had a local female elder for twenty-five years and another church has had one for twenty years. Those serving their church for two years are in the greatest number.

Female Elders and Church Size

A study of the effect of church size on the decision to elect female elders indicates some interesting trends. Graph #4 displays the number of churches in the various size distributions within the Division.

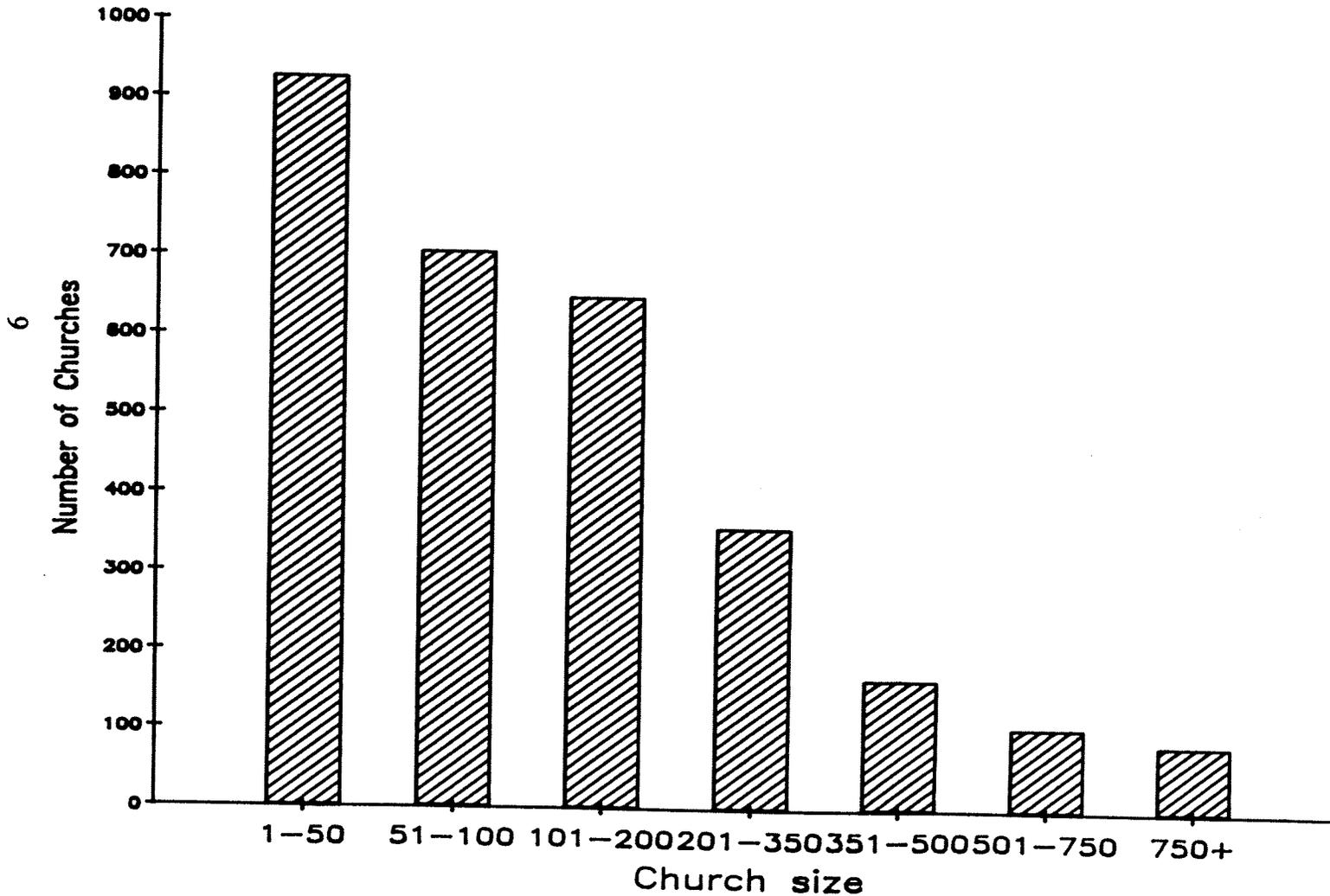
Of the 457 (15%) churches which do have female elders the following distribution is given. Fifty-nine (13%) female elders serve in churches of 1-50 members. Eighty (18%) female elders serve in churches of 51-100 members. One-hundred-six (23%) female elders

Type of Elders



GRAPH 2

Size of Churches Responding in NAD n=3036



GRAPH 4

serve in churches of 100-200 members. Eighty-four (18%) female elders serve in churches of 201-350. Forty-three (9%) female elders serve in churches of 351-500 members. Thirty-seven (8%) female elders serve in churches of 501-750 while forty-seven (10%) serve in churches of 750 members or more.

When put in a pattern of trend by church size the following emerges and can be seen in graph #5:

1 - 50	6%
51 - 100	11%
101 - 200	16%
201 - 350	23%
351 - 500	26%
501 - 750	36%
Over 750	55%

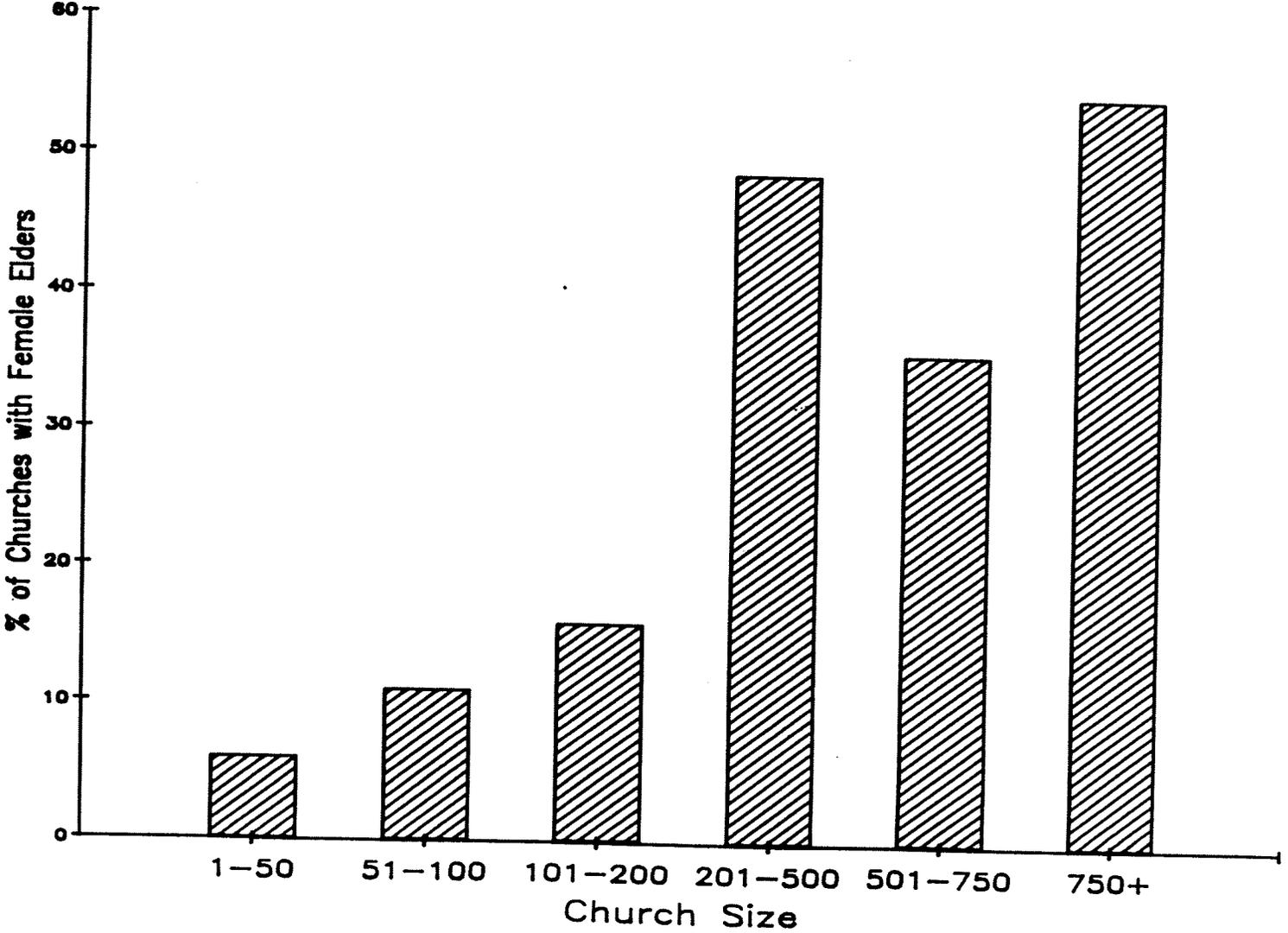
So while there are fewer actual number of churches in the Division with a membership greater than 350 members, the larger the church size the greater the chance it will be open to electing a female for an elder. In light of the fact that most smaller churches reported having only one elder to serve the congregation, it is more likely that a church's first choice for an elder would be a male where males are capable and willing to serve. Congregations do exist where no elder at all has been elected.

Write-in comments indicated that congregations do exist where there are not males in attendance or who have no males "qualified" or willing to take on the responsibilities of elder, and, therefore, a woman is selected to lead the congregation.

Female Elders in Colleges, Hospitals and Denominational Headquarter Churches

Within the division 63 churches (2%) indicate they are connected to an SDA college campus, 92 churches (3%) are connected to an Adventist hospital, 140 churches (5%) are

Female Elders and Church Size



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GRAPH 5

located near one of the denominations' headquarters offices.

In the 63 churches located near SDA college campuses 38% of those churches have at least one female elder. There are 221 female elders serve in churches near college campuses. Of those 10 are head elders and 11 assistant head elders.

In the 92 churches located near Adventist hospitals 39% have at least one female elder. There are 164 female elders who serve in churches near Adventist hospitals. Of those 11 serve as head elder and 16 as assistant head elder.

In the 140 churches located near Seventh-day Adventist headquarters 29% have at least one female elder. There are 150 female elders in churches near Adventist headquarters. Of those 11 serve as head elders and 17 as assistant head elders (see graph #6).

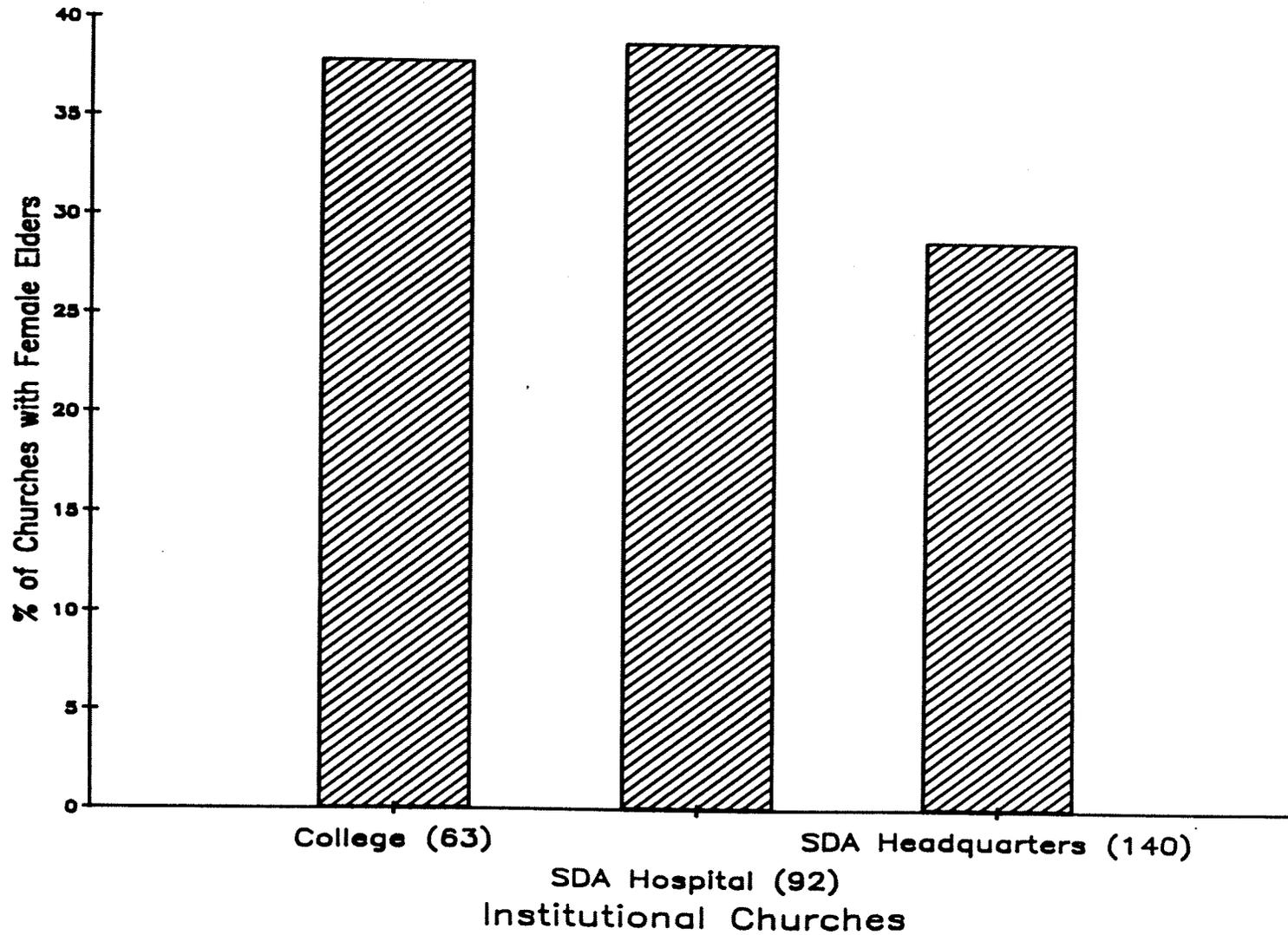
Distribution of Women Elders by City Population

Of the 544 churches in large cities 143 churches (26%) have female elders. Only 9 (3%) of the 338 churches in medium sized cities have female elders. Churches in small cities report 119 (10%) of the 1,185 churches have female elders. Of the 284 churches in the suburbs 65 churches (19%) have female elders. Of the 654 country churches, 61 churches (8%) report female elders in their congregations (see graph #7).

Female Elders and Ethnicity

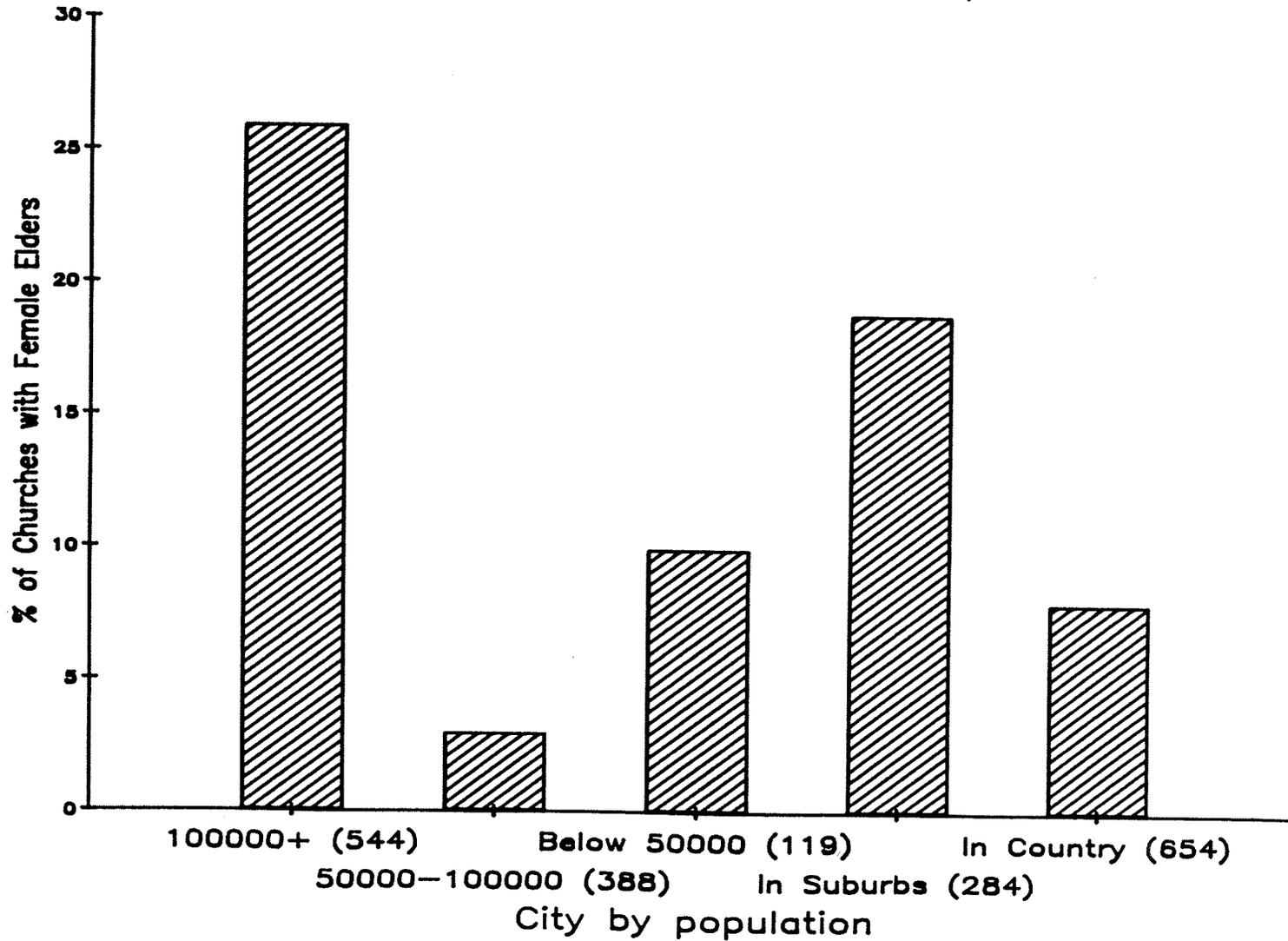
A look at the ethnic make-up of the churches responding reveals the following picture: Fifty-nine churches (2%) are Asian, 338 churches (11%) are black, 172 churches (6%) are Hispanic, 2,313 churches (76%) are caucasian, 123 churches (4%) consider

Female Elders and Institutional Churches



GRAPH 6

Female Elders by City Population



GRAPH 7

themselves multi-cultural or "other" while 31 churches (1%) failed to indicate ethnic make-up of the congregation.

Of interest is the fact that female elders serve in churches of every ethnic make-up. There are seven female elders and one female head elder in the Asian churches reporting. There are 113 female elders, 12 female head elders and 15 female assistant head elders in the black churches. There are 42 female elders, 4 female head elders and 3 female assistant head elders in the Hispanic churches. There are 716 female elders, 46 female head elders and 52 female assistant head elders in caucasian congregations. Of those churches indicating they are multi-culture or "other" there are 81 female elders, 3 female head elders and 8 female assistant head elders.

Within ethnic groups the percentage of women elders to the total number of elders are as follows:

Asian churches	2.1%
Churches of "other races"	3.8%
Hispanic churches	5.2%
Black churches	6.3%
Caucasian churches	6.4%
Multi-cultural churches	12.6%

(See graph #8)

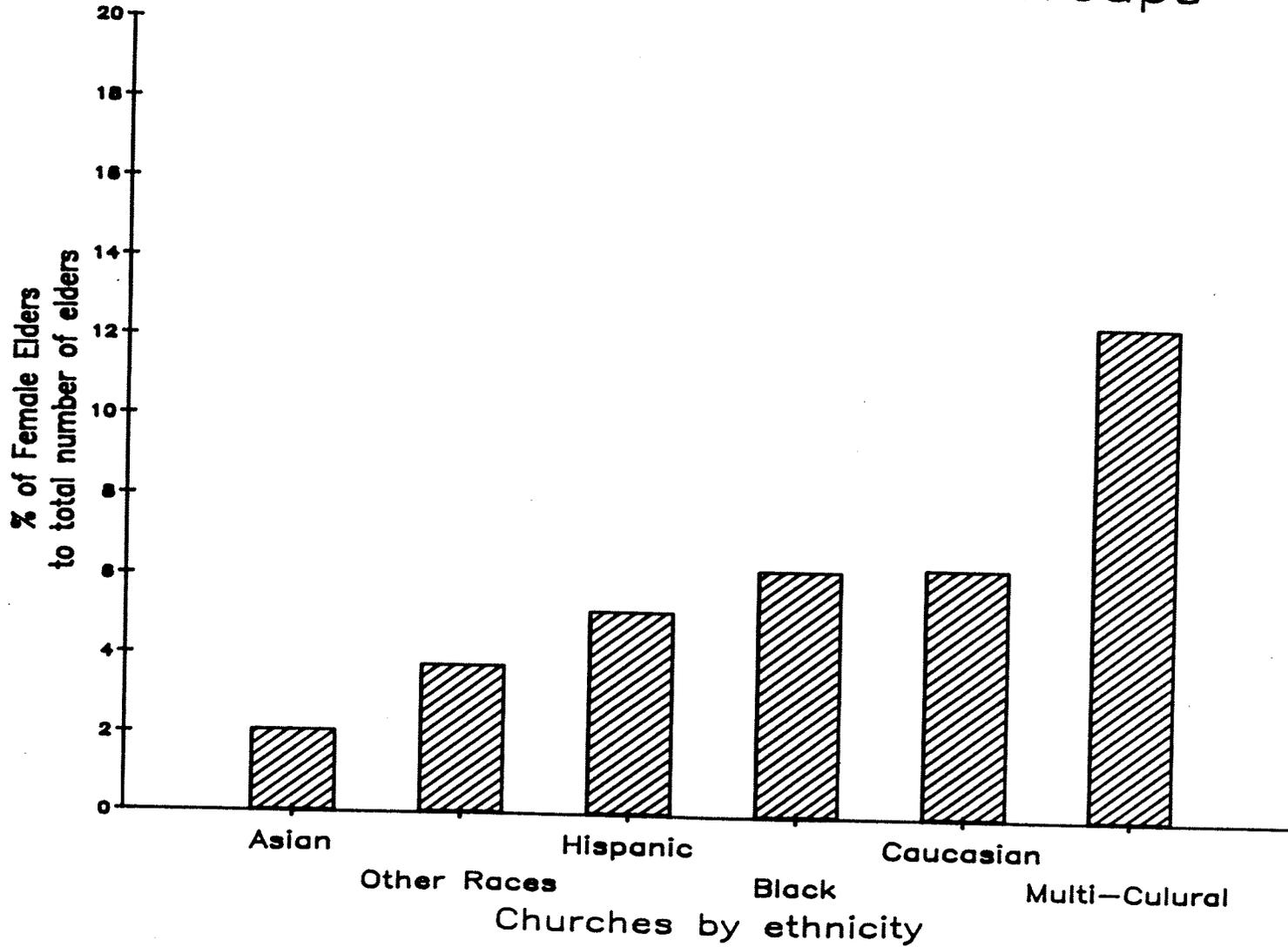
Distribution of Women Elders by Union Conference

The distribution of female elders within the nine unions creates the following picture:

Within the 225 churches in the Atlantic Union, there are 68 female elders, 8 female head elders, and 7 female assistant head elders.

Female Elders and Ethnic Groups

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GRAPH 8

Within the 200 churches in the Canadian Union, there are 28 female elders, 1 female head elder and 1 female assistant head elder.

Within the 383 churches in the Columbia Union there are 196 female elders, 11 female head elders and 27 female assistant head elders.

Within the 313 churches in the Lake Union there are 103 female elders, 14 head elders, and 9 female assistant head elders.

Within the 338 churches in Mid-America Union there are 63 female elders, 3 female head elders, and 9 female assistant head elders.

Within the 335 churches of the North Pacific Union there are 98 female elders, 4 female head elders and 7 female assistant head elders.

Within the 459 churches of the Pacific Union there are 275 female elders, 8 head elders, and 12 female assistant head elders.

Within the 473 churches in the Southern Union there are 93 female elders, 12 female head elders and 5 female assistant head elders.

Within the 291 churches in the Southwestern Union there are 17 female elders, 5 female head elders and 4 female assistant head elders.

Within each union the percentage of women elders to the total number of elders are as follows:

Southwestern Union	1.6%
Southern Union	3.7%
Canadian Union	4.0%
Mid-American Union	4.9%
North Pacific Union	5.3%
Atlantic Union	7.2%

Lake Union	7.5%
Pacific Union	9.0%
Columbia Union	10.0%

(See graph #9)

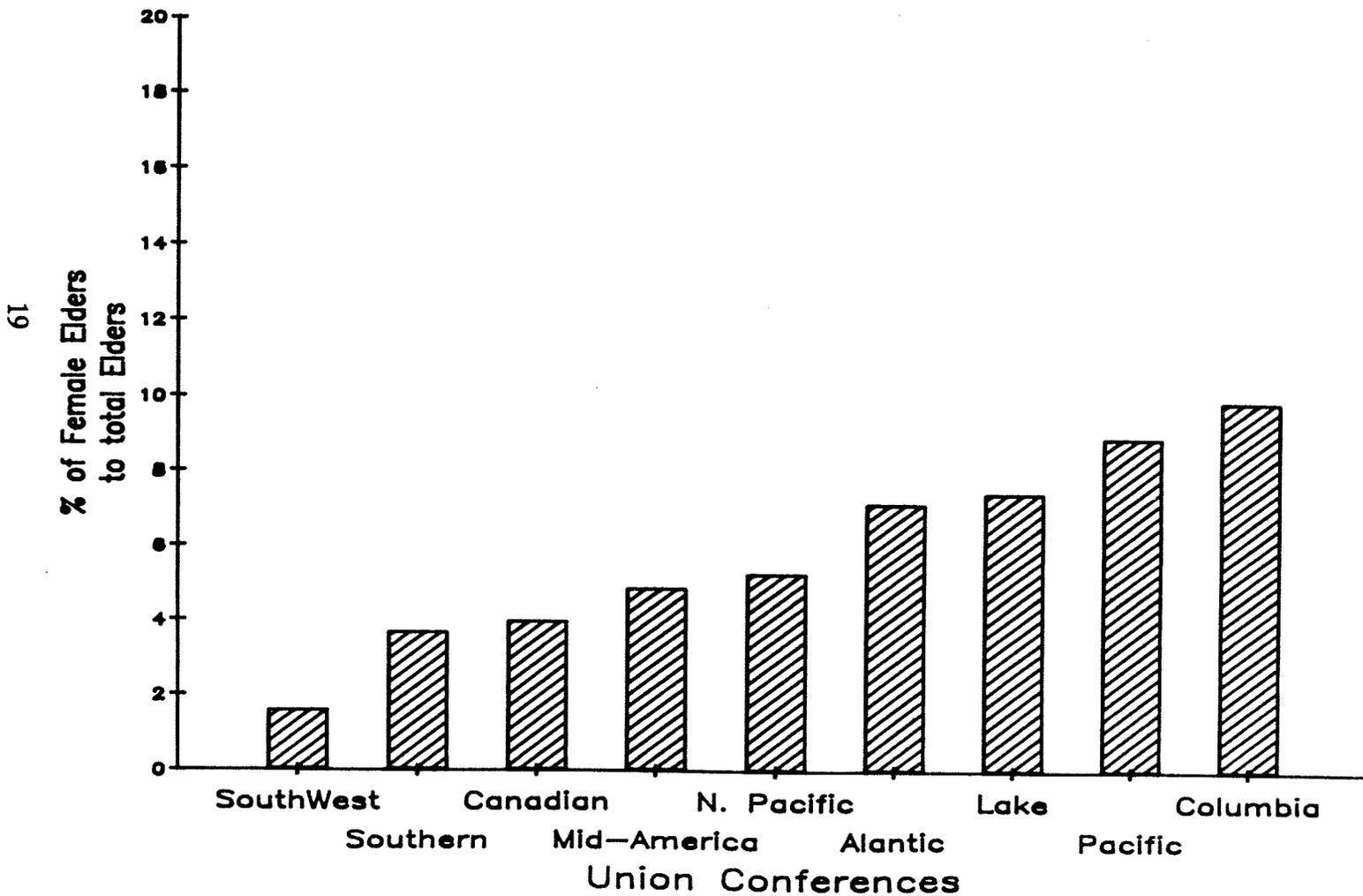
Effect of Female Elders upon Their Congregations

With female elders widely distributed among churches of every size, every ethnic make-up, and within each union conference, we look now to the effect female elders are having upon the congregations they serve.

Of churches having female elders 78% agreed that women elders had strengthened the board of elders, 77% reported women elders function in the role the same as male elders do, 74% percent found women elders to have a strong ministry to other women. Only 6% of the respondents agreed with the statement "Electing women elders split our church." Of the respondents, 4% indicated members had transferred out of the church when women were elected as elders. Less than 2% of the respondents indicated tithe and offering had been withheld because members disagreed with the concept of women serving as local church elders.

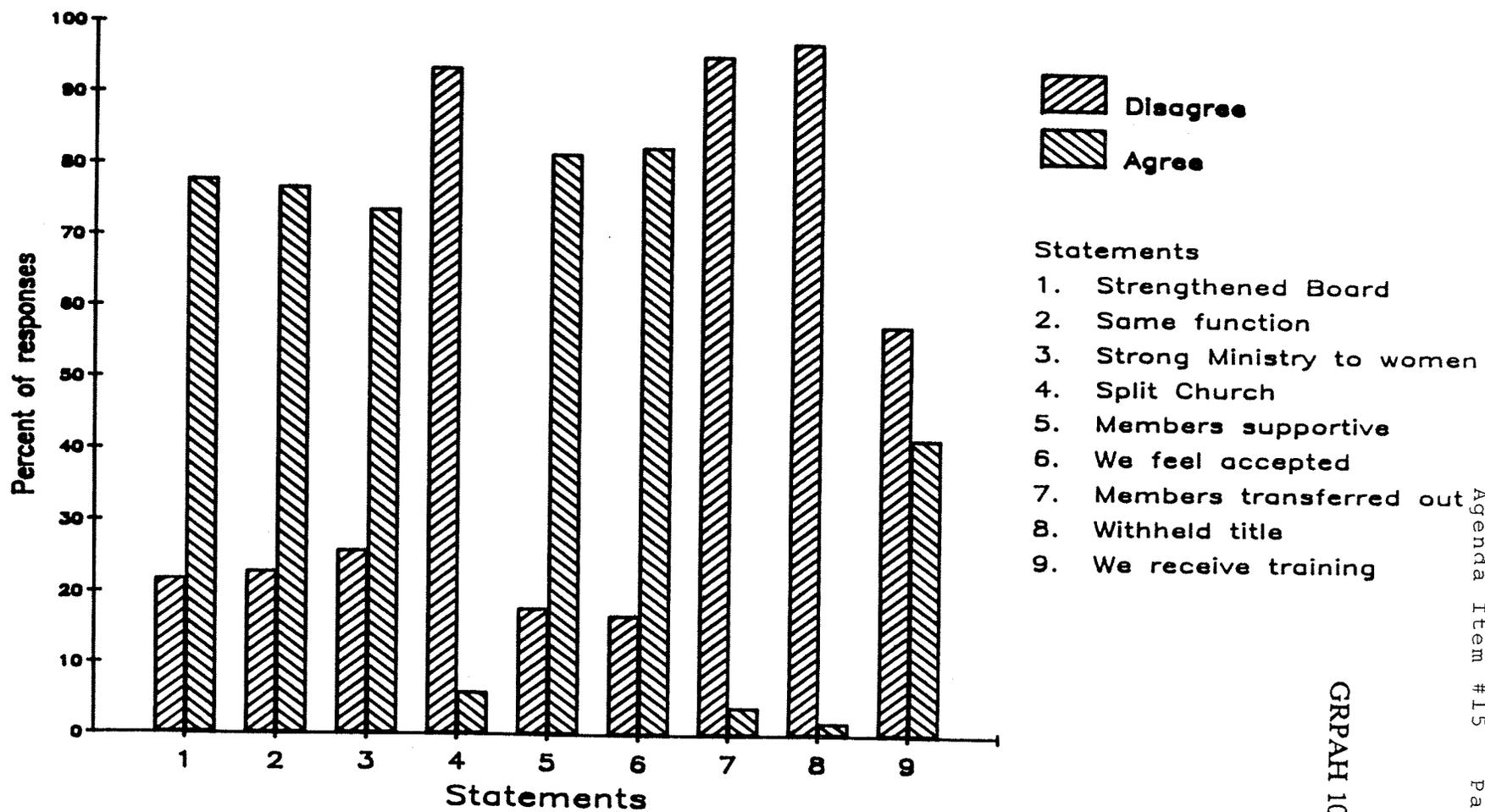
Pastors indicated that 42% of the women elders receive training for the work of elder. A large number of write-in comments from the other 58% indicated, however, that male elders do not receive training for their role as church elder either. Of the pastors who have female elders, 82% agreed that "most of our members are supportive of the concept of women elders," while 83% felt that women elders in their church perceive they are well accepted in their role by other church members (See graph #10).

Distribution of Female Elders by Union Conferences



GRAPH 9

Only Churches with Women Elders



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GRPAH 10

Female Elders Outreach-Nurture Activities

The pastors were asked to rate how frequently women elders provide selected services in their churches. Eighty-nine percent of women elders have regular platform and rotation, 47% reported women elders who give Bible studies, and 14% reported women conducting Revelation seminars. Again write-in comments indicated male elders do not regularly give Bible studies or conduct Revelation seminars either.

In 55% of the cases women elders help reclaim backsliders, 32% help train and equip other lay members, and 55% percent preside at communion.

While largely it is the responsibility of the pastor to plan the pulpit schedule, women elders help plan the pulpit schedule in 28% of the cases. Of the respondents 9% reported women elders chairing church board meetings and 8% chairing church business meetings.

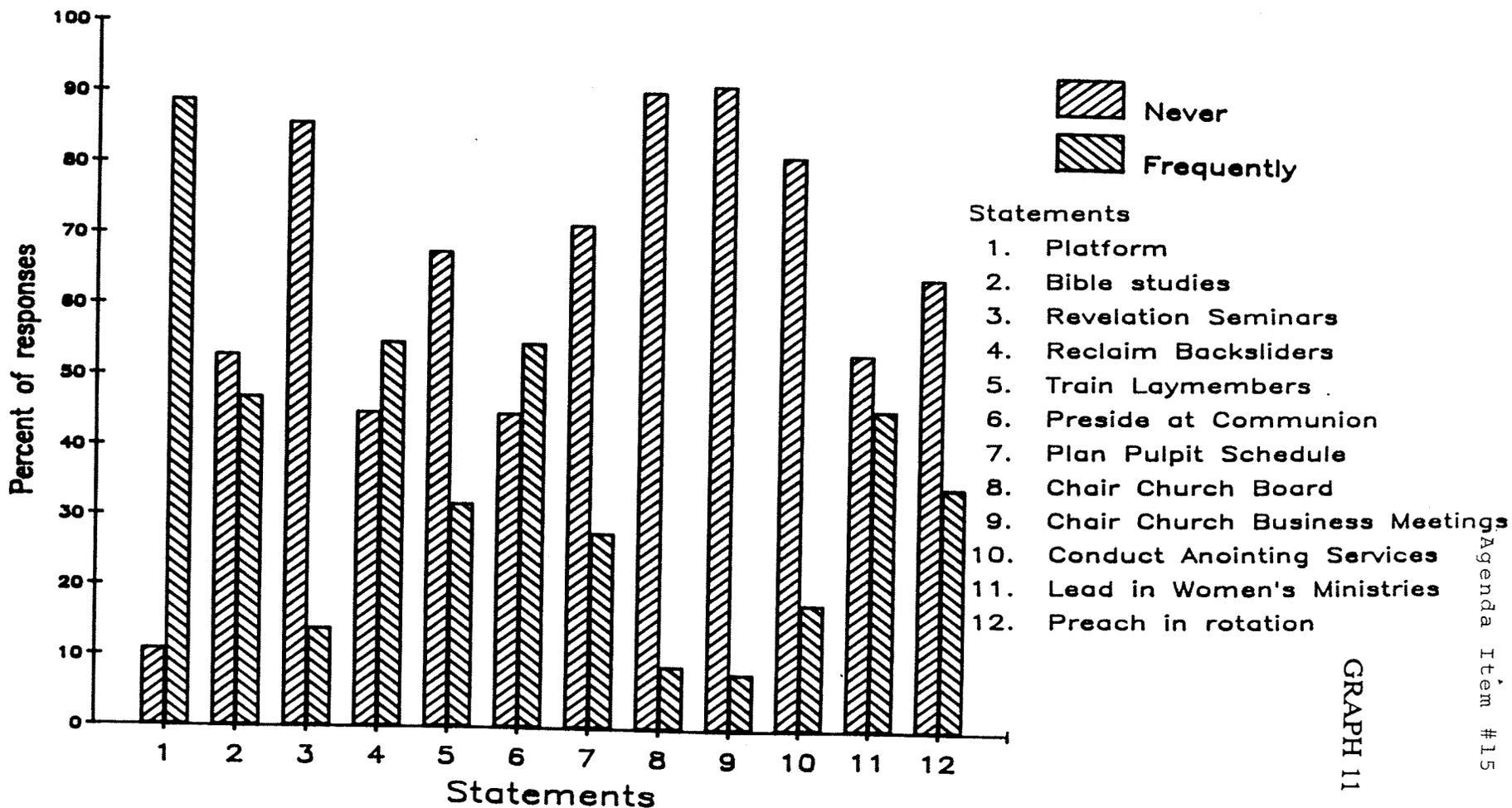
In 18% of the cases, women assist in conducting anointing services. Women elders lead out in women's ministries in 46% of the churches reporting and 35% of women elders participate in the preaching rotation (See graph #11). Indications are that in churches receptive to the concept of women serving as local elders, their ministry is strong and they face little if any opposition.

Churches with No Female Elders

The primary purpose of the study was to discover where women were being asked to serve as local church elders and to determine what effect these women were having on the nurture and outreach of these churches. Section II of the survey was to be filled out only by churches who currently do not have a female elder. It was the purpose of this section of the survey to determine the degree of interest these churches might have in

Only Churches with Women Elders

n=457



GRAPH 11

the ones most opposed to women elders serving in Seventh-day Adventist churches.

Churches with no women elders were asked to indicate whether or not they had given study to the issue of selecting a female for a local church elder. The following report is given from the 2,579 churches who do not have female elders.

Response from 43% of the churches indicates that "having a woman elder has never been mentioned in our church." Six percent state they are "currently giving study to the female elder issue," while in 11% of the churches respondents indicated "it is probable that our church will elect women elders in the near future." Of those responding, 40% indicated that "our church will probably not elect elders in the foreseeable future" (See graph #12).

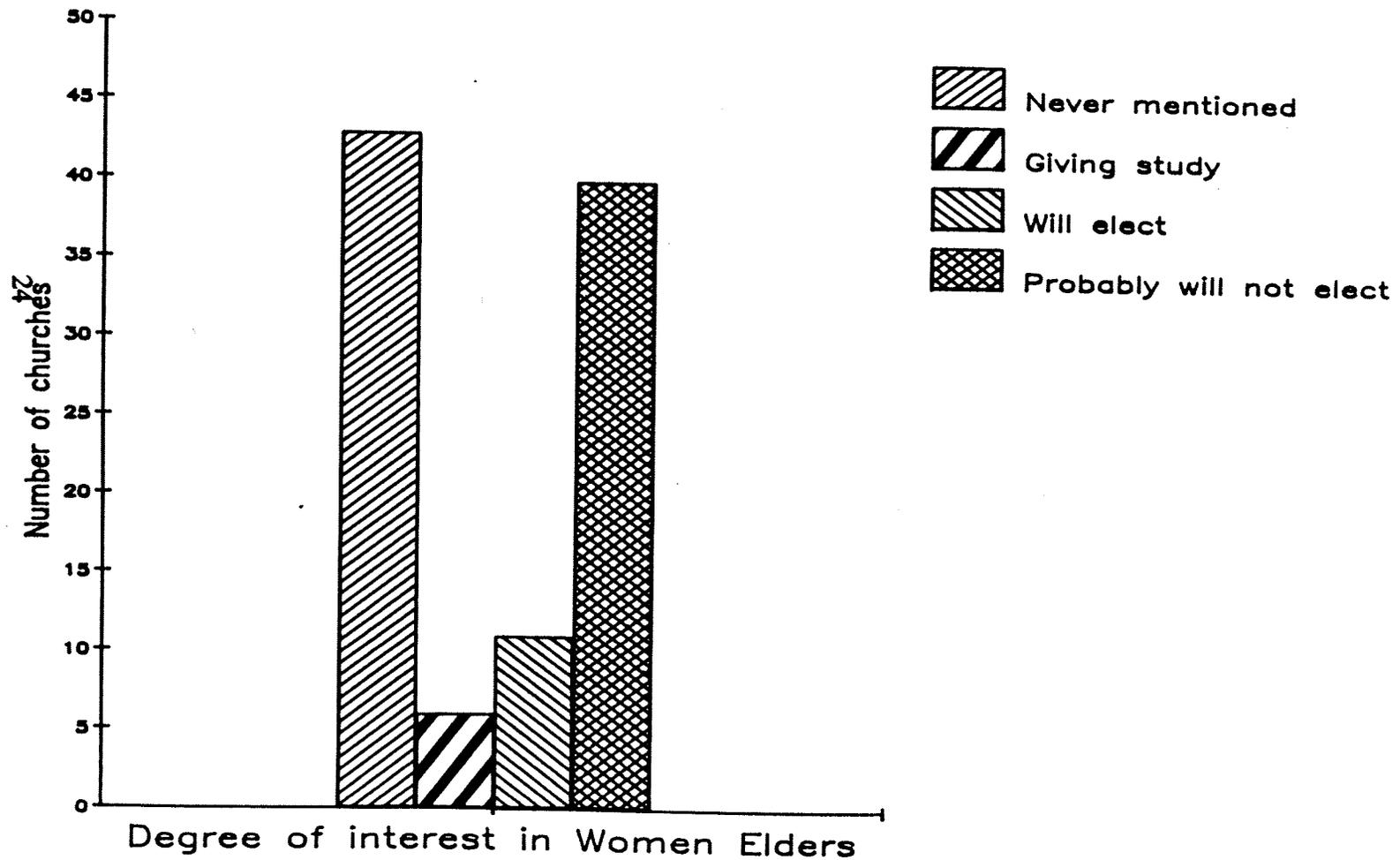
Churches with no female elders were asked to indicate whether the greatest opposition to the election of female elders was coming from men or from women in the congregation. In 9% of the responses, men were the most opposed to electing females as elders. In 19% of the cases, women were the most opposed to electing females as elders. Of the respondents, 58% indicated by circling both men and women that men and women were equally opposed to electing females as church elders. There were 14% who circled "does not apply" indicating that no one was opposed or there had been no way to measure opposition by gender response (See graph #13).

Write-in Comments

Write-in comments and full letters to ICM shared the greatest amount of feeling of opposition to electing and ordaining women. Many cited Scriptural quotations which allegedly indicate the practice of having women elders is not supported by Scripture. Some individuals expressed the opinion that it was wrong for the General Conference to allow it.

Only Churches with No Female Elders

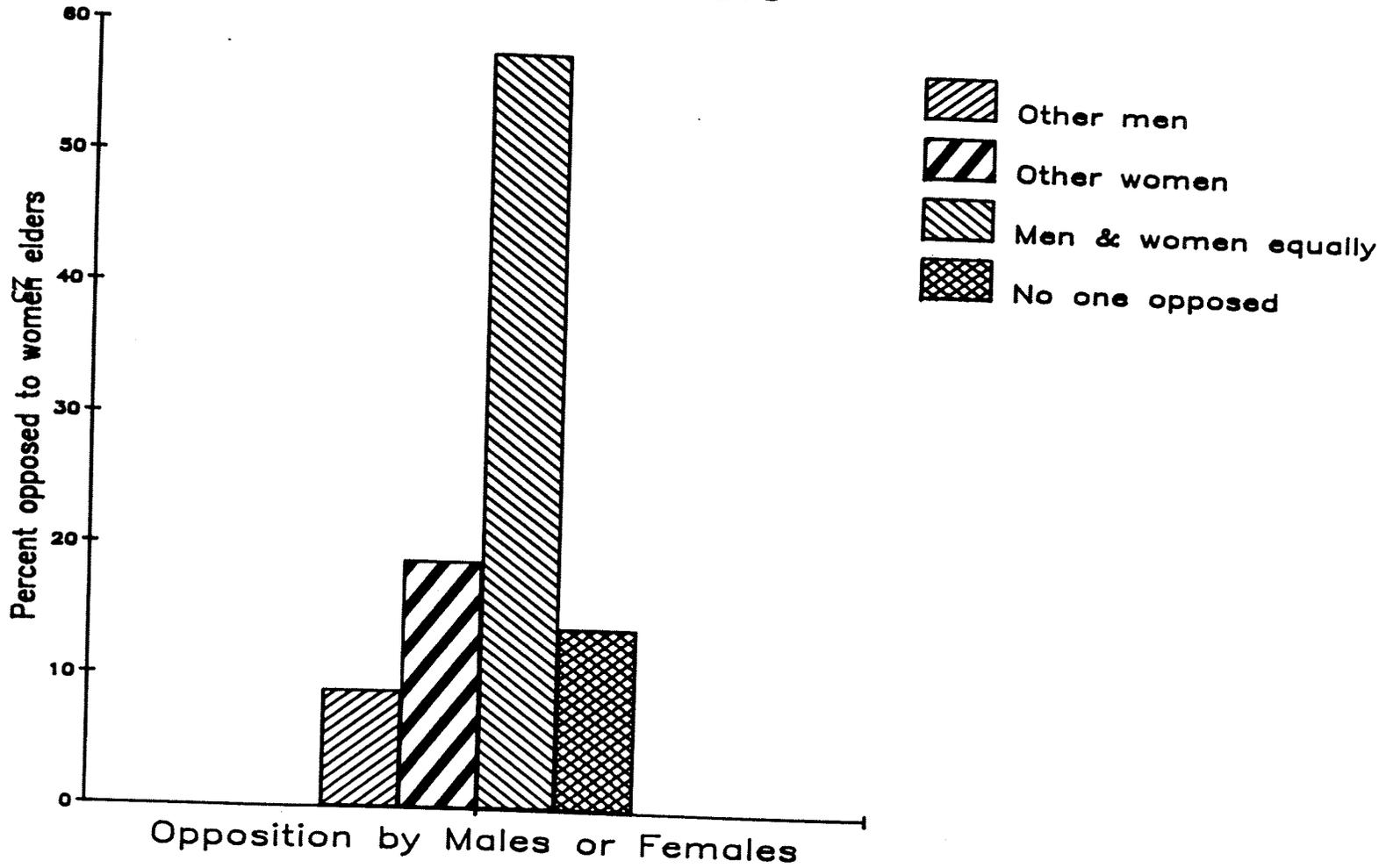
n=2579



GRAPH 12

Only Churches with No Female Elders

n=2579



GRAPH 13