

## **SURVEY REPORT**

### **“Ideas about Employing Blind Persons in Ministry”**

Institute of Church Ministry

Submitted to

**North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The NAD Blind Person in Ministry survey explores the possibility and obstacles to employ blind people in ministry. It seeks to know what Conference administrators believe, their attitudes towards employing blind people into ministry. The findings show a generally sympathetic attitude toward blind persons with a desire to help them or to treat them as normal persons. Most administrators (more than 80%) have had some form of experience with them either through casual relationships, social events, close or very close friendships or family relationships, although just a few had substantive/friendship experience with legally blind persons (13.6%) and totally blind persons (12.4%). Yet, there appears to be a huge lack of knowledge regarding employment and development of persons with significant physical handicaps. Less than 4% say they have extensive knowledge; just a few of them (9.9%) say they have limited knowledge on the subject. While administrators moderately believe it is possible that a legally blind person can be effective as a pastor, they are less optimistic when it comes to hiring a totally blind one.

The major concern of the administrators when it comes to hiring blind persons is related to transportation or mobility (59%), especially among those who have had up-close connection with them (63.8%). Most administrators (65%), before committing to hiring blind persons, would like to learn from other denominations that have successful track record working with them. However, a significant percentage (43.8%) among the respondents seems favorable to hiring blind persons who have assets that equal or surpass those of sighted persons as associates or assistants to senior pastors, and 41.3% suggest to provide financial incentives through the NAD or other funding organizations to Conferences willing to take on interns who are blind.

Recommendations: it would seem appropriate as a follow up on this survey that the NAD 1) identify and study benchmark religious organizations with successful experience in employing blind persons, 2) offer more learning opportunities to administrators on issues related to employing persons with disabilities, and 3) encourage Conferences to set modest target for hiring the blind just as the NAD does for other categories of persons (women, youth, minorities) with gifts but limited opportunity.

## INTRODUCTION

Little is known about blind person in ministry. To what extent would demands of the pastorate be impacted by this disability? The North American Division Research Committee has approved the study entitled “Ideas about Employing Blind Persons in Ministry” to be conducted by the Institute of Christian Ministry, in the Unions and Conferences within the NAD territory. The study was implemented from January through May 2019. The purpose of this study is to heighten awareness of a group that seems to be underutilized and disenfranchised. The goal of the study is to explore possibilities and obstacles related to hiring blind persons in ministry. It particularly seeks to know what administrators believe, and their attitudes towards employing blind people into ministry.

Definition of terms: “Legal blindness is a level of visual impairment that has been defined by law either to limit allowed activities (such as driving) for safety reasons or to determine eligibility for

government-funded disability benefits in the form of educational, service, or monetary assistance.”<sup>1</sup> Are considered legally blind, according to the U.S Social Security Administration (SSA), persons who have 1) reduced central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in their better eye with use of the best eyeglass lens to correct their eyesight; or... 2) Limitation of your field of view such that the widest diameter of the visual field in your better eye subtends an angle no greater than 20 degrees.<sup>2</sup> Total blindness is complete loss of vision and light discernment in both eyes.

## METHODOLOGY

The study applied a quantitative design. It included filling out an online/SurveyMonkey.com questionnaire that asks a variety of questions about the leaders’ involvement with and attitudes toward the Church and its programs. In addition, there were questions about daily life.

The Principal Investigator, in collaboration with NAD Presidential office, sent email to selected leaders/administrators within the Unions and Conferences inviting them to take the survey, which was voluntary and anonymous, and thus collected their thinking about the treatment of sight-limited persons desiring to work for the Church.

The study collected eighty-one (81) correctly filled out questionnaires over a period of 5 weeks, from February 25 to March 30, 2019. Quantitative data was downloaded from SurveyMonkey, in an Excel format, and in SPSS format for analysis. Standard statistical analyses approach such as generating percentages, chi square testing, and crosstab analysis was used to answer the research objectives.

## KEY FINDINGS

The findings are regrouped in five broad categories: 1) Attitude/feeling in the presence of blind persons, 2) Overall experience with legally and totally blind persons, 3) Possibility to hire blind persons in ministry, 4) Major concerns about hiring blind persons in ministry, and 5) Suggestions regarding hiring qualified blind persons.

### 1. Feeling/Attitude toward totally blind persons

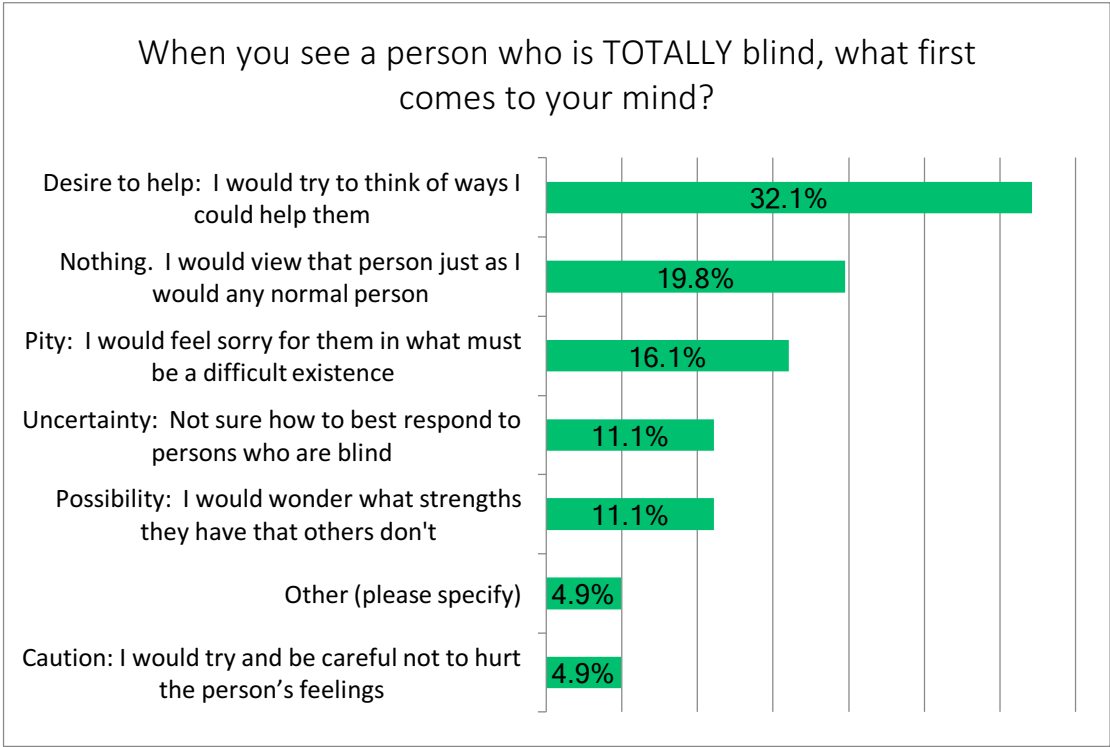
*Question 1.* There seems to be a certain sympathy and a general feeling of powerlessness related to a person’s blindness. The “desire to help” comes first (32%) among several possible feelings/attitudes in the presence of a blind person. The second attitude expressed is (19.75%) “nothing.” This attitude consists in viewing the blind just as any normal person. The third attitude (16.05%) is “pity,” feeling sorry for blind persons in what must be a difficult existence

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Hellem, “What does ‘legally blind’ mean?” All About Vision, <https://www.allaboutvision.com/lowvision/legally-blind.htm> (accessed May 17, 2019).

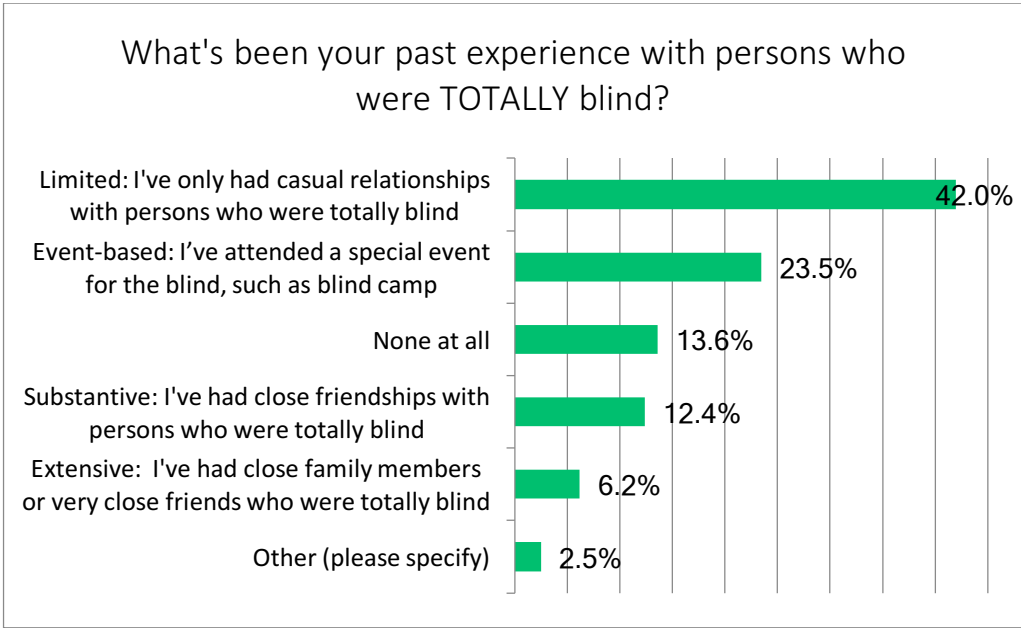
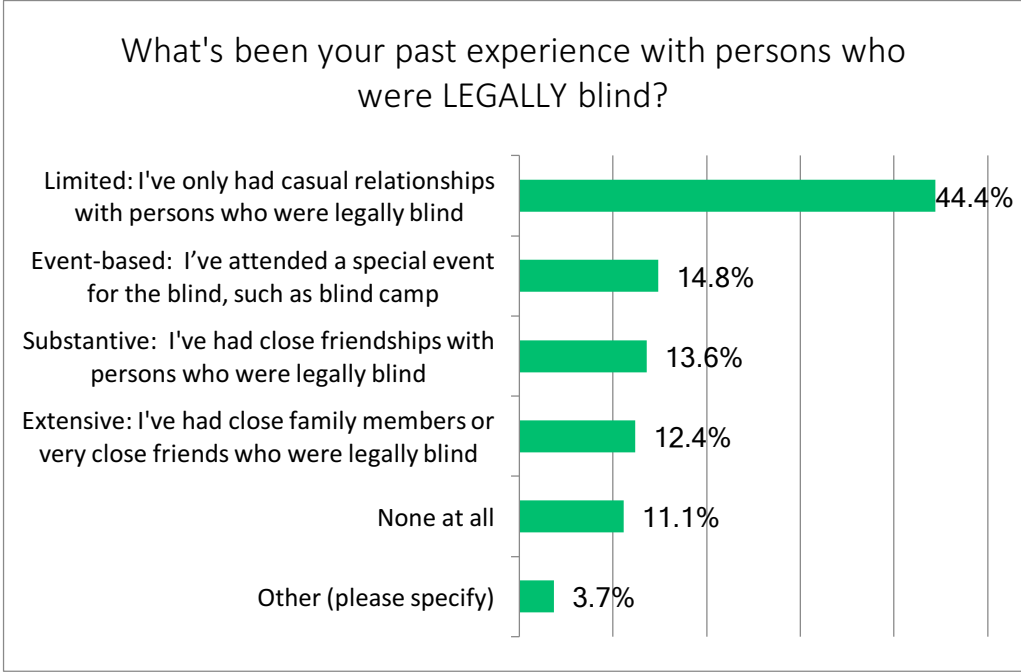
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ssa.gov/ssi/text-eligibility-ussi.htm#blind>

for them. Just 11% of survey participants seem to think of “possibility” when they see a blind person, willing to explore the strengths blind persons may have that others do not have.



**2. Experience with LEGALLY blind and TOTALLY blind persons**

*Questions 2 & 3.* Most leaders have had some form of contact/interaction/experience with legally and totally blind persons either through casual relationships (with legally blind 44.4%, with totally blind 42%), social events (14.8%, 23.5%), close friendship (13.6%, 12.4%), family relationships or very close friendship (12.4%, 6.2%). However, very few leaders had substantive/friendship experience with legally blind persons (13.6%) and totally blind persons (12.4%). A significant number of them have limited experience with legally blind persons (44.4%) and totally blind persons (42%). Just a handful of leaders have no past experience at all with legally blind persons (11.1%) and with totally blind person (13.6%).



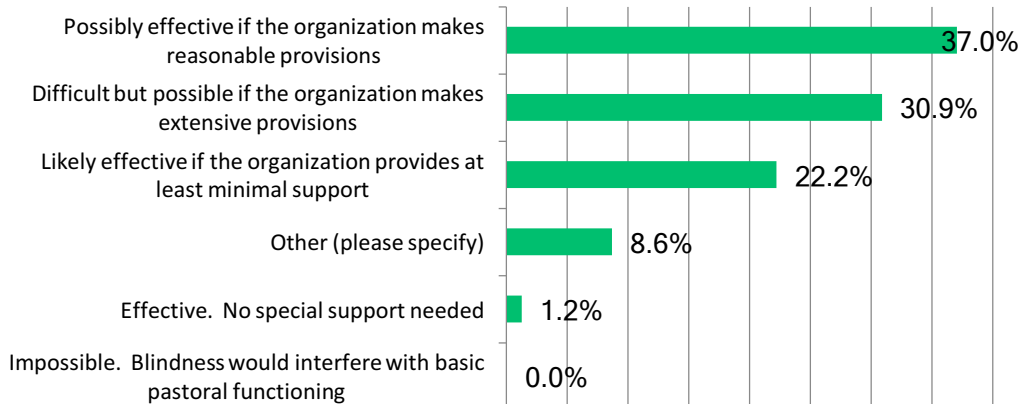
*Question 4.* A slightly higher percentage of leaders have had an experience with blind person which they felt was truly successful (53.2% yes vs 46.8% no). Participants describe their positive/successful experience in general terms such as “When I was a young man [I] knew a pastor who was totally blind,” “I have worked with pastors who were legally blind and have served their people well,” “Our Conference Evangelist is a blind person,” “Interaction with several blind pastors,” “We had a legally blind pastor who served us well,” and “We have a part time pastor who is legally blind.”



### 3. Possibility to hire LEGALLY and TOTALLY blind persons in Ministry

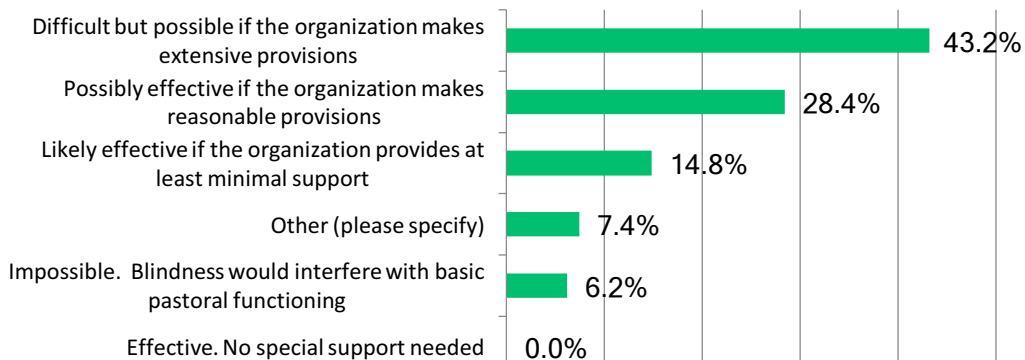
*Question 5.* The belief that it is possible for a LEGALLY blind person to be effective as pastor, if certain conditions are met, is shared by most administrators. No one (0.0%) thinks that it is impossible. Those who think the hired legally blind person can possibly be effective as a pastor if the organization [the Conference] makes reasonable provisions come first (37% of respondents), followed by those who think it will be difficult but possible if the organization makes extensive provisions (30.9%), and those who think the legally blind is likely to be effective if the organization provides at least minimal support (22.2%).

Hiring a pastor in your conference who is blind could mean making adjustments. To what extent do you think a person who is LEGALLY blind could be effective in that role?

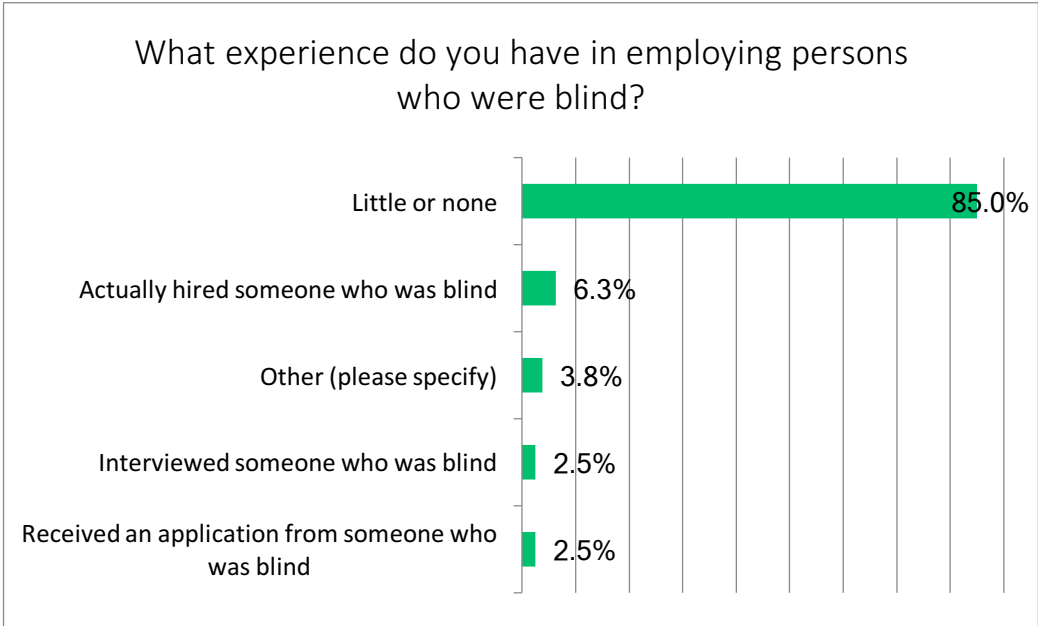


*Question 6.* However, there is less optimism when it comes to hiring TOTALLY blind persons. Some administrators (6.2%) think that it is impossible for a blind person to be effective as a pastor. Those who think it will be difficult but possible if the organization [the Conference] makes extensive provisions come out in a greater percentage (42.2%), followed by those who think that the hired totally blind could be possibly effective if the organization makes reasonable provisions (28.4%), and those who think he/she could be likely effective if the organization provides at least minimal support (14.8%).

Hiring a pastor in your conference who is blind would mean making adjustments. To what extent do you think a person who is TOTALLY blind could be effective in that role.

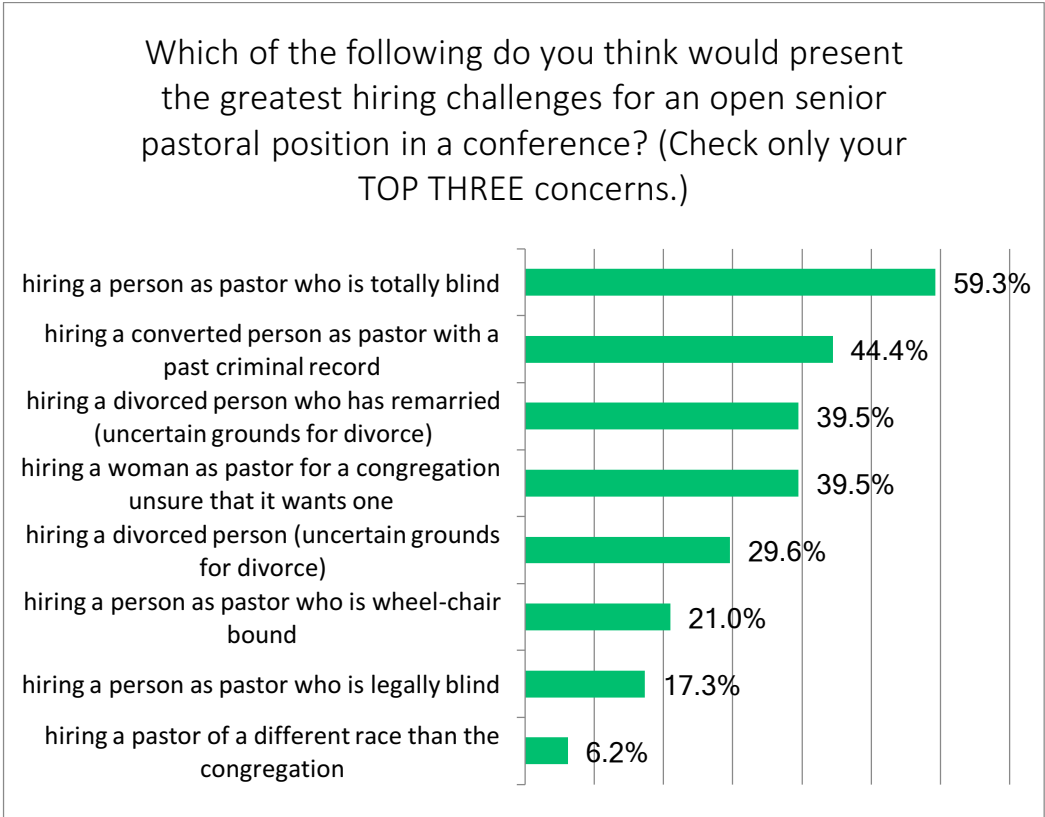


*Question 7.* The majority of the administrators (85%) have little or no experience in employing persons who are blind.



*Question 8.* Hiring a person as pastor who is totally blind is ranked the greatest hiring challenge by the administrators (59.3%), greater than hiring a converted person with a past criminal record (44.4%), than hiring a divorced person who has remarried (39.5%), than hiring a woman pastor for a congregation unsure that it wants one (39.5%), than hiring a divorced person (29.6%), than hiring a person who is chair-bound (21%), than hiring a legally blind person (17.3%), than hiring a pastor from a different race than the congregation (6.2%).





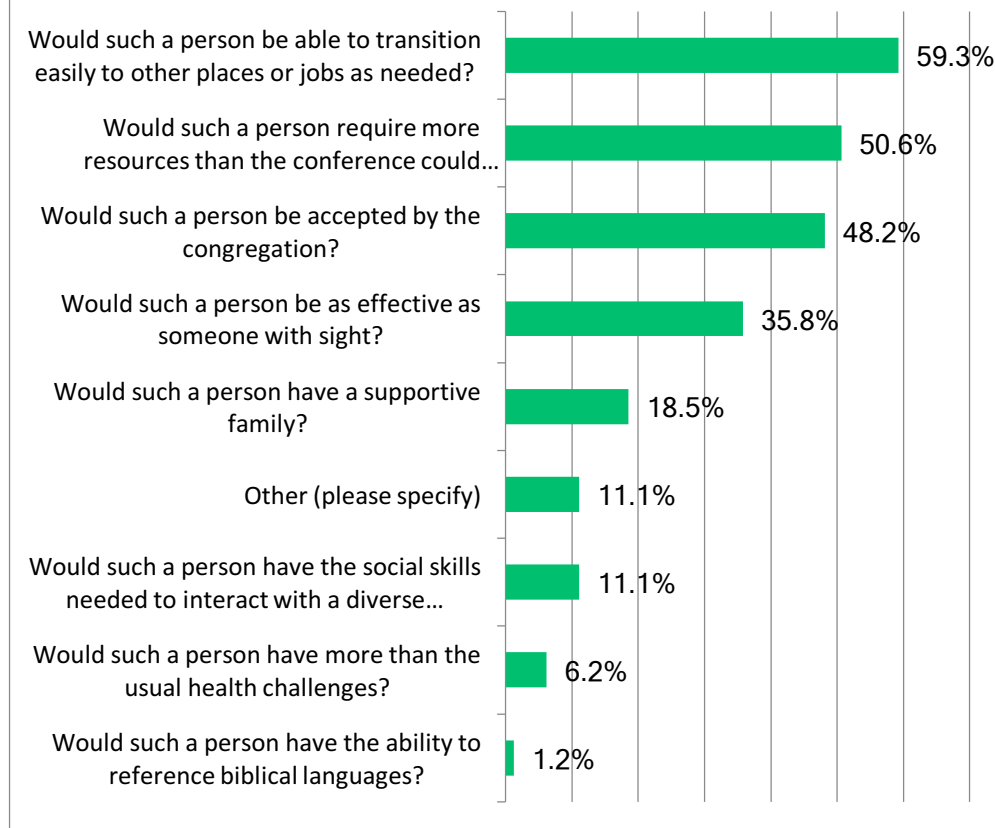
The above table is quite concerning showing the real barrier to hiring blind in relation to all the other issues.

**4. Major concerns about hiring blind persons in ministry**

*Question 9.* The greatest concern of the administrators regarding hiring a blind person seems to be related to transportation/mobility. The leaders are concerned that the person would not be able to transition easily to other places or jobs as needed (59%), that he or she may need more resources than the Conference could afford (50%), that the blind person may not be accepted by the congregation (48.2), and that blind person would not be as effective as a person with sight (35.8%).

Note that the concern regarding the mobility/transition of the blind person is much greater among leaders (63.8%) who said having had truly successful experience with a blind person than those who said they had not such experience (36.2%).

What would be your greatest concerns about hiring persons who are blind to the pastoral ministry?  
(Check only your TOP THREE concerns.)



**Perceived concerns - some of these comments are similar and could be condensed and not duplicated. Most reflect concerns with transportation:**

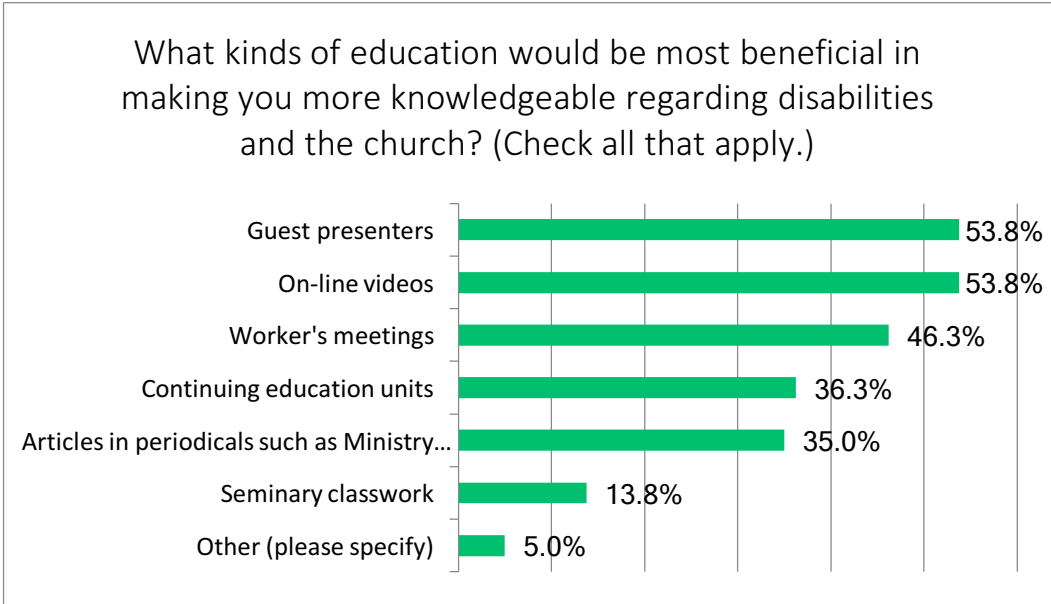
- Almost impossible because our geography requires a pastor who can drive. we have considered such individuals but have not found a way.
- I think it would also require that he/she had a family member who could support them for transportation etc. If they did I would say possibly effective.
- Even if I think that it would be extremely difficult because some basic pastoral functions would be difficult to fulfill (i.e. visitation), I am very open to evaluate a model in which blind people could fulfill pastoral roles. As ministry is very large, I am wondering if we should not identify those area in ministry where each person would best fit. Even pastors' performance in different areas of their ministry varies from one individual to another, however, there is a minimum expectation for each and every area of ministry that has to be met.
- Normally impossible. In rare situations, it might be difficult but possible. Driving is essential.

- It would depend upon transportation arrangements. It works in the metro area where there are good public transport options, and goods and services are accessible without a car. It seems it would be much more difficult in a rural multi-church setting.
- Difficult (although not impossible) because the congregation for whom we would hire a pastor would compare him with other pastoral candidates, and all other things being equal, would choose a sighted person because they would perceive a sighted pastor could more easily fit their needs.
- Also, the conference would hire not based on the needs of the immediate church, but upon his place-ability in other churches in the future. Long term needs (of the pastor, conference, and churches) must be considered, and when considered, would make it less likely (although not impossible) to hire him.
- The spouse of the Totally Blind person would need to be part of their ministry.
- It would depend upon transportation arrangements. It works in the metro area where there are good public transport options, and goods and services are accessible without a car. It seems it would be much more difficult in a rural multi-church setting.
- As long as the blind person is competent in performing their responsibilities given their limitations, I'm fine.
- How would this person accomplish travel to visit members in their home or hospital?
- In home visitation and driving is essential to pastoral ministry and the blind cannot drive.
- The assumption I would have is that if a blind person had made it through the theological training and earned a degree all these concerns would have been answered.
- How would transportation issues be resolved?
- Our territory is much more difficult than most to get around. ADA accommodations are years behind other parts of the country.
- Winter weather issues and travel from church to church. Freezing to death out in the country is no fun.
- Travel and visitation could be a problem in smaller one pastor districts
- Transportation. How would that individual serve multi-church districts and travel to visit members?
- Each pastor is a unique individual. As employees, they all come with needs, desires, and concerns.
- To get to the place where they can apply for a position says they have self-motivation and abilities to adapt to the situation. I would expect this to be true of a blind individual too.
- I've hired employees with physical handicaps, but it has generally up to them to make the accommodations they need.

*Question 10.* There appears to be a huge lack of knowledge regarding employment and development of persons with significant physical handicaps. Less than 4% say they have extensive knowledge; just a few of them (9.9%) say they have limited knowledge.



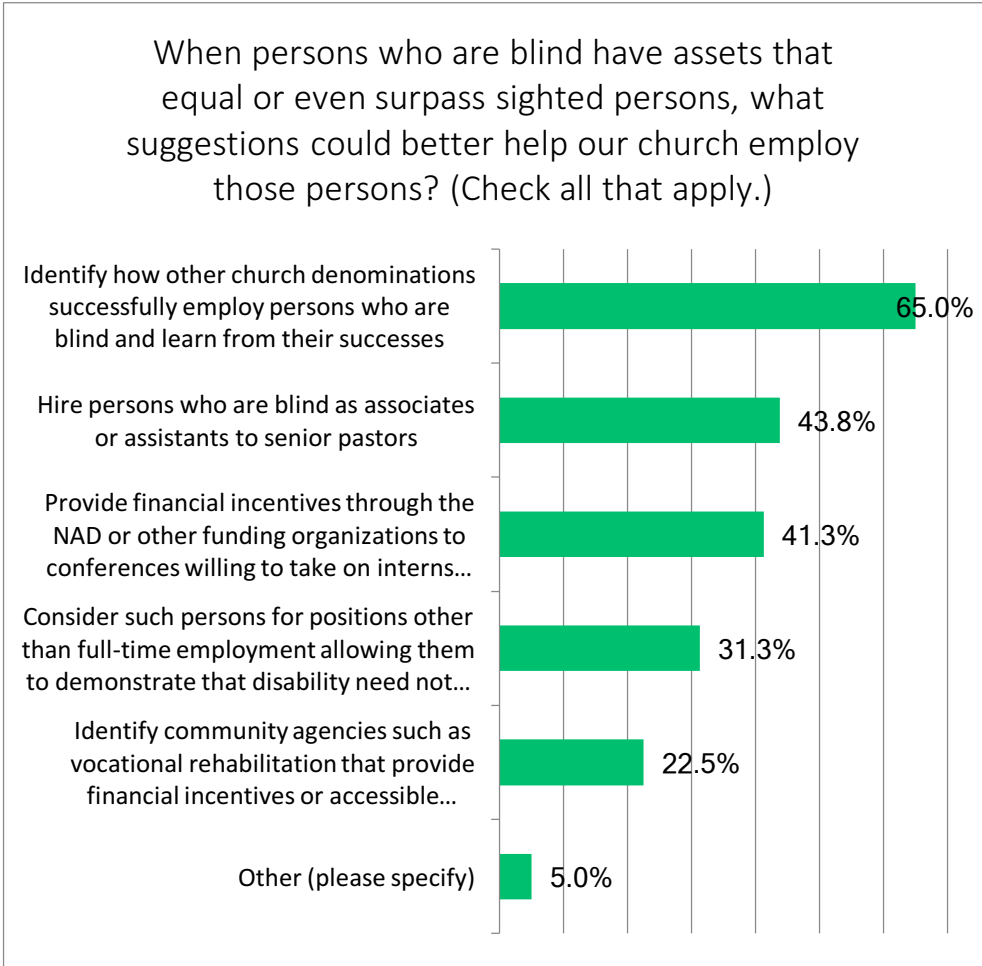
*Question 11.* Answers to question 11 seem to indicate an openness to learn. Conference administrators have a preference for the following teaching methods in order to fill their gap in terms of knowledge regarding disabilities and the church: guest-presenters (53.8%), on-line video (53.8%), workers’ meeting (46.3%), continuing education (36.3%), and articles in periodical such as Ministry Magazine (35%).



**5. Suggestions regarding hiring blind persons having same qualifications with or higher than sighted persons**

*Question 12.* A majority of church leaders recommend to identify how other church denominations successfully employ blind persons and learn from their success (65%). A

relatively significant segment of the respondents is favorable to hiring persons who are blind as associates or assistant to senior pastors (43.8%), or to provide financial incentives through NAD or other funding organizations to Conferences willing to take on interns who are blind (41.3%).



**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The fact that 81 administrators took the time to fill out the survey indicates a certain interest in the topic. It shows that they are not indifferent to the plight of blind persons. The study shows an overall positive attitude toward people with blindness but also a lack of knowledge regarding the employment of blind persons among Conference administrators. The administrators do not think it is impossible to hire blind persons as pastors, but they have questions (expressed and possibly non-expressed in this survey) that need to be answered first. There seems to be a general belief that if this major concern, the one related to transportation/mobility, is satisfactorily addressed, Conference administrators could possibly consider hiring qualified blind persons in pastoral ministry. Below are a few recommendations for NAD to consider:

- Follow up/benchmark study: identifying denominations or religious organizations that employ blind persons and learn from their experience. Focus mainly on best practices, policies, and pitfalls as they handle the transportation issues. The study could as well 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 on issues related to employment of persons with disabilities. Learning opportunities may 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 potentially will help discard misconceptions and stereotypes regarding blind persons. Such dialogue could start with Ray McAllister, the first completely blind student to graduate with a PhD in religion from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, who has volunteered to meet with Conference leaders and answer what they want to ask about the blind and ministry. Dexter Thomas, a legally blind who has served as a pastor, could also participate in the dialogue.
- Encourage Conferences to set modest target for hiring the blind just as the NAD does for other categories of persons (women, youth, minorities) with gifts but limited opportunity. Such encouragement could include providing financial incentives to Conferences who hire interns or pastors who are blind, similar to the initiative to creating a path for women, youth and minorities in pastoral ministry.