



FREE WILL BAPTISTS AND

ORDINATION

A REPORT FROM THE COMMITTEE ON
DENOMINATIONAL RESEARCH

In fall 2020, the Committee on Denominational Research (CDR) sought information regarding ordination practices across the denomination. The survey received responses from 18 states and one Canadian province, representing 66 local (district or quarterly) and state associations. Of the respondents to the survey, 95% currently serve or previously served as part of the official ordination process for their local association or quarterly.

According to responses, these groups charged with ordination go by a variety of names: ordaining or ordination council, presbytery board, ordaining committee, examining committee, or credentials board, among others. For simplicity, this article simply refers to these various groups as “ordaining bodies” and those recommended for ordination as “candidates.”

Difficult Questions

The vast majority (83.3%) of ordaining bodies use a standard questionnaire to assess candidates for ordination. However, 56% of these ordaining bodies do not conduct criminal background checks, and another 21% indicated they are unlikely to do so. The same is true when it comes to finances, with 48% indicating no financial status check and another 27% indicating they are unlikely to do so.

Interestingly, a majority (54.2%) of ordaining bodies do not meet (or are unlikely to meet) the candidate’s wife during the ordination process. And only 10.6% of ordaining bodies have a policy that requires meeting the candidate’s wife. Yet, a strong majority (76%) will not ordain someone who has been divorced, and 44.7% will not ordain anyone whose spouse has been divorced.

While some respondents indicate a preference for pastoral candidates to have a certain level of education, a wide majority of ordaining bodies (80.3%) place no educational requirements on ordination. At least one ordaining body requires candidates to complete required reading and training seminars during licensure.

Assessing Pastoral Qualifications (According to 1 Timothy 3)

Most ordaining bodies assess each candidate’s knowledge of and commitment to Free Will Baptist doctrine through a series of questions administered through written applications or verbal interview (and both in many cases). They lean heavily upon the testimony of the recommending church or previous association when it comes to assessing whether a candidate meets biblical qualifications.

Most indicate no “formal” assessment to gauge the candidate’s ability to preach and teach. Others make opportunity for the candidate to preach at an associational meeting (often corresponding to the meeting where the candidate is examined for ordination). A handful of ordaining bodies require the candidate to submit written or recorded messages for members to review prior to in-person examination.

The same reliance on the testimony of the recommending church or previous association is also true when it comes to the candidate's general leadership abilities, sober-mindedness, and ability to minister to the needs of others. Some boards require answers to questions regarding ministry and life philosophy or present on-the-spot ministry scenarios to which the candidate must respond during written and oral interviews. Many respondents openly admit the need to "do a better job assessing these biblical qualifications" as an ordaining body.

One association pairs each candidate with a "seasoned pastor for mentoring" over a set period of time, and then relies upon the recommendation of that minister regarding ordination.

Transfers of Ordination

When a church or candidate requests transfer of ordination from another Free Will Baptist association, most ordaining bodies simply require a letter of good standing from that body. Others, however, contact the previous ordaining body to make inquiries regarding the candidate. Several associations require those transferring ordination to follow the same rigorous process as new candidates.

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When a pastor (or ordaining body) requests transfer of ordination to another Free Will Baptist association, most ordaining bodies provide a letter of good standing, unless some known behavior or troubling church polity would prohibit good standing. Some associations take this a step further, interviewing the pastor's most recent church before meeting as a board to take a formal vote on whether to recommend the candidate for transfer of ordination. One respondent noted about this process, "We don't just 'rubber stamp' them and send them on their merry way!"

The majority (65.6%) of ordaining bodies have ordained someone from another denomination by simply requir-

ing these individuals to go through the steps required for ordination (although some do not include licensure due to experience). As noted earlier, most ordaining bodies lean heavily on questionnaires that include questions regarding Free Will Baptist doctrine. In the case of someone from another denomination, extra attention is given to denominational distinctives. In addition, some ordaining bodies require a probationary year, extra vetting regarding doctrine, ongoing supervision and reporting by local church leaders, or required reading in Free Will Baptist doctrine.

Discipline and Restoration

Discipline of ordained individuals is largely handled on a case-by-case basis. However, most ordaining bodies indicate the following general process for discipline: when an accusation is received, the accused has opportunity to respond (usually by a personal phone call or a visit by a member of the ordaining body or associational leadership). If the response is unsatisfactory, or if the seriousness of the accusation warrants, a second interview is conducted by a small group, committee, or board. Ultimately, the matter is presented to the larger association to determine officially whether ordination credentials will be revoked. One respondent notes the serious nature of this process, stating, "We have to act on accurate information and not hearsay."

A limited number of ordaining bodies have an established plan of restoration for those who have been stripped of ordination for disciplinary reasons. Often taken on a case-by-case basis, these restoration procedures are varied. However, most seem to include the following: obvious repentance, willingness to submit to restoration guidelines, ongoing counseling where warranted, regular accountability, and a probationary period.

A Serious Process

While those surveyed openly admitted to room for improvement in the ordination process, their serious answers also make it clear that ordination is something Free Will Baptists take seriously.

About the Committee: To learn more about the CDR, or to read more survey results, visit www.nafwb.org/research.
