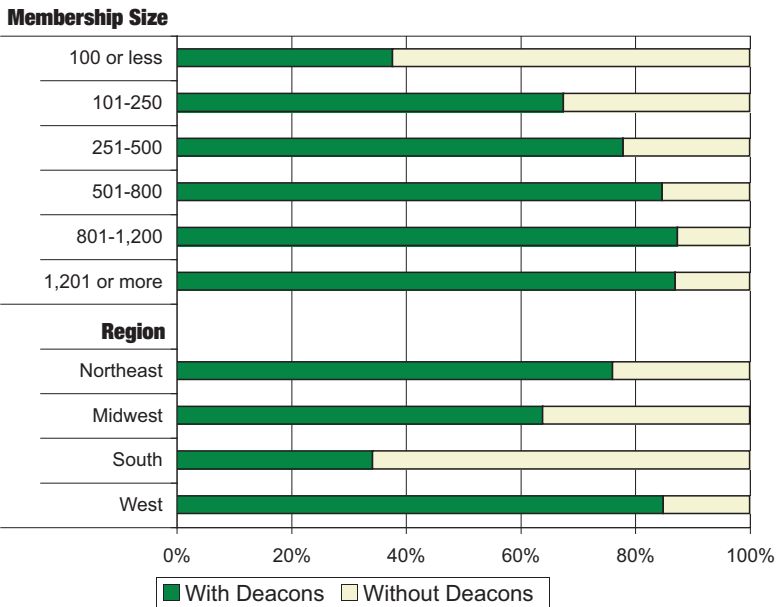


GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM



Distribution of congregations with deacons by membership size and region



Giving deacons their due

Presbyterians have three ordained offices, but deacons usually receive less attention than ministers and elders. Let's give deacons their due by looking at some statistics on congregations that have this office.

- **A majority of congregations** (58 percent) have deacons.
- **Congregations with deacons are larger**—296 members on average, compared to an average of 127 members in deacon-less congregations.
- **Diacons are concentrated outside the South**, with 85 percent of congregations in the West, 76 percent in the Northeast, and 64 percent in the Midwest having deacons, but only 34 percent in the South.
- **The median congregation with deacons has nine**, and 12 percent have 20 or more.
- **In 91 percent of congregations with deacons**, women comprise half or more of the total, including 17 percent where all deacons are female.

What the research shows

The *Book of Order* is brief regarding deacons' duties, but a lot of responsibility is packed into the short list: "To minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress both within and beyond the community of faith."

It would be hard to overstate the importance of these ministries, or to overestimate the amount time required to fulfill them. Yet, the office is optional; sessions may assume such duties in lieu of deacons.

Why do some congregations choose to have deacons and others not? The numbers at left provide some clues. That more large congregations have deacons suggests advantages to dividing church responsibilities as size increases. The concentration outside the South suggests a greater emphasis on deacons in the former United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the predecessor denomination in northern and western states.

What the numbers don't tell us is how the presence or absence of deacons affects congregational ministry among the needy. Future research along these lines could help congregations determine how best to structure themselves for more effective ministry.

In the meantime, we can learn more about deacons by examining other existing data. I'll do that in the December issue by looking at the characteristics of current deacons. □

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