

# WORSHIP PRACTICES OF SBC CHURCHES IN ALABAMA

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## INTRODUCTION

This project set forth the goals of developing a more comprehensive understanding of the state of worship in Southern Baptist churches in the state of Alabama. More specifically, this research sought to paint a clearer picture of what is happening in worship as it relates to the following questions:

- What does the local church context look like?
- Who is leading in worship and what actions are performed in that leadership?
- What habits and practices shape and guide the worship service?

The impetus for the survey, among several things, was a perceived absence of a baseline understanding about local church worship in Alabama SBC churches, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. Even pre-pandemic, anecdotal reports suggest that the look, sound, and leadership of worship has been shifting more broadly over the past decade; but it seems that the pandemic accelerated certain changes in ecclesial life and practice. The scope of a national survey was not possible and too broad for this project, so it seemed appropriate to focus on a single denomination within a particular state. While the pandemic was (and has been) an influential factor in local church life, the impact of the pandemic is the not focus of this research; rather, it is the intent to better define and understand local church worship practices in Southern Baptist Convention churches throughout Alabama.

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## METHODOLOGY

This report provides significant amounts of data on trends and statistics produced from quantitative and qualitative surveys. With over 3,000 SBC churches in the state of Alabama, this survey reflects data from approximately 400 different churches of varying size, location, local context, and worship philosophy.

The quantitative survey included fifty questions organized in five categories:

- Worship Demographics
- Worship Leader Profile
- Worship Leadership Team Profile
- Choir and Orchestra Profile
- Profile of Worship Practices

Following various sample surveys with potential questions and consultations with academic and church leaders, the survey was narrowed to the final fifty questions. There were approximately 30-40 additional questions covering adjacent areas of interest, but they were removed from the original list for future exploration. The intent was to limit the survey to no more than 50 questions with a survey completion time of 15-20 minutes. We did sample test surveys to a small cohort and found that we were in the desired window of completion time.

The survey was distributed using mass emails obtained through the Alabama State Board of Missions office and their church database. We conducted an email campaign through the month of May and June (2024) to collect surveys, targeting churches of varying size and well as worship leaders of both full-time, part-time, and volunteer status. In addition, we built a website (<https://www.samford.edu/programs/grants/survey-of-southern-baptist-churches-worship-practices-in-alabama/>) to hold and promote the survey as well as future reports of research findings. We also promoted the site through social media channels. We made direct contact with the Directors of Mission (Associational Mission Strategists) in each local Southern Baptist association around the state. We made sure to target our email survey to at least five key churches within each of the associations, under the advisement of the Director of Missions from that association. This would help ensure that we would have survey data from across the state, even though some local associations are larger than others. As anticipated, the most challenging places to procure survey responses were in rural, less populated regions. We placed follow up phone calls to the target churches within each association to help prompt a response to the survey that was sent to them.

Knowing that not all churches are online or use email, we also did a random sampling of small churches to mail out approximately fifty paper surveys. Cost prohibited a larger population for the paper mail out. We received back approximately twenty-five paper surveys.

# SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

## CHURCH DEMOGRAPHICS

This section analyzes key structures within churches, with a focus on service formats, congregational sizes, age demographics, racial composition, and music preferences. Important differences across populations are highlighted to provide deeper insights into trends within these categories.

Some of the key takeaways from this section of the study include:

- **Church Size** directly influences service style, music choices, and leadership structure. Larger churches tend to be more diverse and innovative.
- **Age Demographics** are strongly correlated with worship style—older congregations prefer traditional hymns, while younger ones embrace contemporary formats.
- **Racial Diversity** remains limited in most churches, although multi-racial and larger urban churches demonstrate greater inclusion.
- **Music Preferences** show a significant reliance on classic hymns but growing adoption of contemporary styles in younger and larger congregations.

In framing the questions, we discovered it was helpful to clarify certain terminology and acknowledge contexts that structure their services in different ways (weekend services, overflow/simulcast services, multiple service styles, etc.). To do this, we used the language of “primary weekend service.” For churches with multiple services, we asked them to complete the survey according to the service with the largest average weekly attendance.

Throughout this report both for consistency and ease of explanation, information regarding church size will often group churches into four size categories:

Small =	<149
Medium =	150-499
Large =	500-999
Mega =	1000+

### Key data points:

- 65% of churches have only one service.
- 29% of churches have two or more services.
- 88% of churches have only one style of service.

- Almost 62% of churches describe their most attended worship service as the service that is blended” in style, whereas 29% say “traditional,” and almost 9% say contemporary.<sup>1</sup>
- Those churches with a size of 149 or less report most commonly that they have only one service (74%) and one style of service (93%). Churches with an attendance of 150-499 report the use of a blended or one-service model (68%). Not surprisingly, larger churches often report having two services,<sup>2</sup> but a smaller percentage reports having a service in more than one style.<sup>3</sup>
- Approximately 40% of churches have an attendance of <100.
- Approximately 48% of churches have an attendance of 100-499
- Almost 12% of churches have an attendance of 500 or more.
- 50% of churches report the average age of worship attendees as 49 or less.
- 50% of churches report the average age of worship attendees as 50 or older.

#### **Smaller Churches** (under 100 attendees)

- are more likely to have only one worship service (80%), reflecting limited resources and smaller teams.
- Smaller churches lean heavily toward a blended or traditional style.
- 65% of small churches report a blended format, combining hymns and contemporary elements.
- Traditional services are also prominent (30%), reflecting the influence of older congregations.
- Worship tends to be traditional or blended due to smaller music teams and resources.
- Leadership responsibilities are often multifunctional—the pianist, pastor, or a single volunteer may select the music.
- Congregations are generally older and less diverse.

#### **Medium Churches** (100-499 attendees)

- Services are predominantly blended (60%), with increasing use of contemporary elements (15–20%).
- Music selection typically falls to a dedicated worship leader (80%), with occasional collaboration in medium-sized teams.
- Age diversity is more balanced, with a mix of younger and older attendees.

#### **Larger Churches** (500+ attendees)

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<sup>1</sup> While the service style designations have serious limitations due to varied usage, inconsistent understanding, and conflicting definition, they were helpful for the purposes of this research because of their wide-spread use. They are terms that most people know and use, even if they use them differently.

<sup>2</sup> 55% of 500-999 churches have two services. 71% of 1000+ churches have two services.

<sup>3</sup> 28% of 500-999 churches have one style. 57% of 1000+ churches have one style; 43% with more than one style.

- are more likely to host two or more services (70%) to accommodate higher attendance and diverse needs.
- Larger churches are more likely to incorporate contemporary or multi-style worship:
- 20% of large churches offer more than one worship style (e.g., a contemporary service in the morning and a traditional one later).
- These churches are significantly more likely to host multi-style services (30%) or fully contemporary worship formats (20%).
- Congregations tend to be younger and more racially diverse, reflecting broader cultural engagement and outreach.
- Larger music teams allow for varied worship styles, modern instrumentation, and professional-quality presentations.

#### **Other Trends:**

- Churches with older average age (50+ years):
  - Worship leans toward traditional (50%) or blended styles (40%).
  - Classic and gospel hymns dominate the music selection, reflecting congregational preferences for familiarity and heritage.
  - These churches are often smaller, with fewer resources for contemporary worship formats.
- Churches with younger average age (under 50 years):
  - These churches are more likely to embrace contemporary worship or modern hymnody.
  - Services feature praise choruses, modern instrumentation, and less reliance on hymnals.
  - Younger congregations are more common in medium to large churches, with intentional outreach to families and younger generations.
- Contemporary service styles are more common in churches with younger congregations or multi-racial diversity.
- 80% of respondents selected “Worship Leader” as the person responsible for selecting the music for weekly services.
- Almost 11% report a variety of other approaches, most commonly involving a collaboration between several people.
- As a point of concern, only 36% of churches with an attendance of 149 or less indicate that their average age of attendees is <49. 64% report an average age 50+.
- Most churches (92%) report that their weekly attendance consists at least 80% or more white/Caucasian ethnicity.
- Most churches (78%) report that their weekly attendance consists of less than 10% of black/African American ethnicity, and only 17% report that 10-20% of their congregation is black/African American.
- Most churches (96%) report that 10% or less of their congregation is Hispanic.
- 2% of churches report that their weekly attendance consists of less than 10% White/Caucasian ethnicity.

- Almost 4% of churches report an attendance that is 90% or more Black/African American ethnicity.
- It is surprising to note that the most consistently used congregational song genre across churches of all styles is “classic hymns” (e.g., “Holy, Holy, Holy”). The least commonly used genre reported across churches of all styles was “Historical/Classical Fine Art.” Several respondents noted the inclusion of Southern Gospel music, while some also include bluegrass and jazz.
- Traditional church services report using very little modern hymnody (12% vs 46% overall).
- One noteworthy observation is that among contemporary service style churches the second most frequently used music genre is classic hymnody followed by modern hymnody. This leads one to think that there are other factors beyond music genre that influence the designation of a service as “contemporary.”
- Interestingly, both YCs and OCs indicate that they use the same three genres most frequently in their services (Gospel Hymns, Classic Hymns, and Modern Worship).
- It is also worth noting that both YCs and OCs use Modern Hymnody at almost the same rate (49% vs. 46%)

## **WORSHIP LEADER PROFILE**

The second section of the survey examined demographics, background, and roles of individuals leading musical worship. Questions covered titles, age, race, gender, employment status, leadership style, and service elements. The topic of training was excluded for brevity but is worth exploring in future studies to provide a more comprehensive picture of worship leadership.<sup>4</sup> Findings suggest that worship leaders balance musical and pastoral duties, with variations shaped by church context and culture. The emphasis on developing younger leaders and diversifying leadership roles indicates potential shifts in worship leadership dynamics in the future.

### **Key points:**

- Church size and style influence worship leader roles, titles, and practices.
- Larger and contemporary churches emphasize pastoral leadership, combining spiritual and musical roles.
- Smaller and traditional churches prioritize musical roles, often relying on volunteers or part-time leaders.

Respondents were asked to describe their church’s approach to the position of worship leader:

- Single primary leader: 80% of churches
- Church member/lay leader: 11%

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<sup>4</sup> Other questions that were of interest but were removed due to length included questions on the worship leader’s race, background, training, as well as how long the leader had been in his/her role at the church.

- Team rotation: 7%
- No dedicated leader: 2%

Worship Leader titles vary significantly by church size:

- Minister of Music: Most common overall (27%)
- Worship Pastor: Preferred in medium-to-large churches (33%-55%)
- Music Director: Popular in smaller churches (30%)
- Perhaps the most **surprising** observation about the choice of title is that the only title that appears in the top three responses of all church size groupings is “Minister of Music,” possibly suggesting both a priority on ministry and music.

Employment status correlates with church size:

- Full-time: 37% overall (96%-100% in large and mega churches)
- Part-time/Bi-vocational: 35% overall, common in smaller churches (41%)
- Volunteer: 27% overall, most prevalent in smaller churches (44%)

Primary worship leaders are predominantly older:

- 65% of worship leaders are 50+
- Only 27% in smaller churches are under 50
- Secondary and tertiary leaders often skew younger, with 46% of second worship leaders and 65% of third worship leaders under 50. This trend may indicate efforts to mentor emerging leaders within larger churches.
- Perhaps the most **concerning** trend is that the age of almost 65% of all worship leaders is 50+. That trend is even worse among small churches where 73% of primary worship leaders are age 50+. Only 27% of worship leaders in small churches are age <49.
- There is an **encouraging** trend among contemporary service churches that the majority age for all worship leaders is between 30-39, and there is a variety of ages represented among Worship Leader 1.<sup>5</sup>
- One **surprising and encouraging** trend is that some churches report a second worship leader *under the age of twenty*, possibly indicating the engagement of a teenager or college student as an emerging leader under the guidance of an older, seasoned worship leader.
- Is it also **encouraging** that the second worship leader is often younger (almost 60% are <50 years of age), hopefully pointing to signs that churches are raising up a younger generation of worship leaders behind the large percentage of older primary worship leaders.

Men dominate leadership roles:

- Worship Leader 1 (WL1): 77% male

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<sup>5</sup> WL 1: 20-29 (11% vs. 7% overall); 30-39 (22% vs. 15% overall); 50-59 (22% same as overall); 60-69 (33% vs. 26% overall)

- Worship Leader 2 (WL2): 60% male
- One **interesting** trend among traditional service churches is that there are more primary and secondary female worship leaders in traditional service churches than in the overall report.
- It is also **interesting** to note that 38% of churches report that their second worship leader is female, as opposed to 24% female for the primary worship leader.

Most primary worship leaders do not use instruments:

- Never: 45%
- Every week: 28%
- A **surprising** trend is that small and medium churches prefer to lead with an instrument either *every week* or *never*. There is very little middle ground, while larger and mega churches are more spread out in their responses and prefer to lead *occasionally* or *every week* with an instrument or to *never* lead with an instrument.

Instrument Preferences:

- Piano: 30%
- Acoustic guitar: 30%
- None: 43%
- Anecdotal, it seems that the acoustic guitar has taken over as the instrument of choice. The chart above, however, **surprisingly** reveals that the **piano and acoustic are equally preferred as the instrument of choice for musical worship leaders.**

Service leadership beyond music includes:

- Spoken prayer: 40% lead “most weeks” or “every week.”
- Reading scripture: 30% read “most weeks” or “every week,” but 30% “rarely” or “never” do.
- Spoken leadership/exhortation: 40% engage “most weeks” or “every week.”

Here is a list of the frequency choices and the top two most selected leadership actions:

- *Every week* – conducting the congregation, followed by spoken prayer
- *Most weeks* – spoken leadership, followed by spoken prayer
- *Occasionally* – read scripture, followed by spoken prayer
- *Rarely* – announcements, followed by conducting the congregation
- *Never* – announcements, followed by conducting the congregation

Perhaps a **concerning** trend is that the reading of scripture is not facilitated by the worship leader either most weeks or every week.<sup>6</sup> This seems to reveal perceptions about the musical worship leader’s role in the worship service. It is **encouraging** to see that the

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<sup>6</sup> 36% of traditional churches report that the musical worship leader never reads scripture. 42% of blended church service leaders report that they read scripture “occasionally.” 16% of contemporary service leaders report reading scripture “every week” and 40% say “occasionally.”



musical worship leader is leading in spoken prayer most weeks or every week and engaged in spoken leadership/exhortation moments with some amount of frequency.

## WORSHIP LEADERSHIP TEAM PROFILE

This section highlights the evolving practices in worship leadership, balancing tradition and modernity. Contemporary services lead in innovation, while traditional services maintain a minimalist yet rich approach. The findings emphasize the need for strategies to engage younger participants and sustain leadership diversity.

For those churches with different styles of worship, we asked that respondents answer according to the service that is most attended. The following data points provide a snapshot of the results of this section of the survey:

### Instrument Usage:

- Modern band instruments (piano, guitars, drums, keyboards) dominate, especially in contemporary services.
- Traditional instruments like organs are declining but remain in use in traditional settings.
- Piano (86%) and acoustic guitar (57%) lead usage across styles. Electric guitars and drums are prominent in larger and contemporary settings.
- We see the piano as common in almost all categories. As many have heard anecdotally, the organ has fallen out of usage in many places, but not surprisingly we see an increase in its use in traditional service churches.
- It is also somewhat **surprising** to see the common presence of the same top five instruments in three of the four church attendance categories.
- One **interesting** note about small churches: we see a variety of instruments used in worship under the “other” category likely as an indication that churches will utilize instruments among their congregants.
- Younger churches show the use of modern band instruments (piano, drums, bass, acoustic, electric, keyboard) at a significantly higher rate (roughly 30-36% more).
- We can clearly see that traditional service churches prefer using less instruments in worship, although for special occasions, they note an increase in the use of acoustic and electric guitars.

### Team Composition & Demographics:

- Vocalists and instrumentalists typically range from 1-6 members, with contemporary services engaging larger ensembles.
- Instrumental teams are overall predominantly male, with stark gender differences in team size and roles.
- Female vocal participation is higher, especially in small teams.
- Male vocal participation is notably limited.
- Older age groups (50-59, 60+) are consistently represented.

- Younger groups (20-39) show limited involvement, particularly in traditional services.
- We noticed an **interesting** trend that a greater percentage of blended or traditional styles church services typically prefer a smaller team of instrumentalists compared to their contemporary style church service counterparts.
- As expected, most vocal teams are in the size of 1-6 singers, with only a few services (mainly blended services) utilizing larger teams. There is also an **interesting** data point among contemporary style services that have 10+ singers on a microphone.
- In the two younger age brackets (20-29 and 30-39), we notice a concerning data point of higher percentages responding that they have no (“0”) individuals on their teams in those ages. This is especially evident in traditional services and, conversely, absent in contemporary services.
- It is encouraging that contemporary services report a strong presence of all age brackets, even with a slight increase in the three youngest age brackets.

#### **Special Occasions:**

- Ensembles like orchestras and handbells are used sparingly for festive events.
- Brass, strings, and woodwinds are often reserved for special occasions.

## **CHOIR & ORCHESTRA PROFILE**

The data underscores the enduring significance of choirs in worship leadership, with orchestras playing a complementary role in larger churches. While choirs are a mainstay across service styles, orchestras exhibit limited but impactful usage. Strategies to sustain and expand these ensembles, especially among younger generations, could enhance their role in worship leadership.

#### **Choir Leadership:**

- 78% of surveyed churches include a choir, while 17% have neither a choir nor an orchestra.
- 51% of churches have only a choir.
- 50% lead weekly, with another 22% leading most weeks.
- Most common size: 21-40 members.
- Choirs include a greater number of women.
- Choirs typically range from 21-40 members; orchestras are smaller, often with 15 or fewer members.

#### **Orchestra Leadership:**

- Only 18% of churches report orchestras leading weekly, while 58% do not use orchestras regularly.
- Orchestra usage increases with church size, most prevalent in mega churches.
- Typically, they are fewer than 15 members.
- 18% lead weekly

- Slight gender disparity, with men slightly more engaged in leadership roles.

#### **Other Trends:**

- Choirs lead weekly in 50% of churches, with orchestras used sporadically.
- 11% of churches include both a choir and an orchestra.

## **PROFILE OF WORSHIP PRACTICES**

The survey highlights both strengths and opportunities for growth in worship practices. By emphasizing scripture reading, prayer, and congregational singing while incorporating variety, churches can create more vibrant and spiritually enriching worship experiences.

### **Key Points**

#### **Service Length:**

- Most services last 60-75 minutes, with traditional and contemporary services trending shorter at 50-60 minutes.

#### **Cornerstone Worship Elements:**

- Public scripture reading, spoken prayer, congregational singing, and sermons form the core of worship practices.
- 81% of blended services include scripture reading every or most weeks, compared to 64% in contemporary services.
- Spoken prayer occurs 3-4 times in most services, reflecting a healthy emphasis.
- Singing lasts 20-25 minutes in 41-55% of services, with 3-4 songs being the norm.
- Traditional services tend to sing more congregational songs than contemporary ones.
- Average sermon length is 25-35 minutes, with traditional services occasionally exceeding 35 minutes.

#### **Frequency of Ordinances:**

- Baptism and the Lord's Supper occur infrequently, typically 1-3 times a year or quarterly.
- The Lord's Supper is typically observed quarterly.

#### **Concerning Trends:**

- Some churches omit public scripture reading or limit congregational singing to under 15 minutes.

#### **Encouraging Practices:**

- Most services include 20-25 minutes of singing and 3-5 congregational songs.

### **Areas for Improvement**

Increase Scripture Reading:

- Encourage public scripture reading in every service, utilizing various leadership voices.

Expand Prayer:

- Incorporate more prayer moments (3-5 times) to enrich spiritual engagement.

Enhance Singing:

- Include at least 4-5 congregational songs per service to foster active participation.

More Frequent Ordinances:

- Consider monthly observance of the Lord's Supper to deepen communal worship.

Optimize Sermon Length:

- Aim for sermons within the 25–35-minute range to balance depth and attention.

**Other Recommendations for Variety**

To refresh services and prevent monotony, consider:

- Adding occasional responsive readings or creed recitations.
- Introducing live pre/post-service music.
- Rotating elements to keep services engaging (e.g., alternating between live and recorded music).
- Engage a greater variety of voices in leadership (e.g., singers or instrumentalists leading prayer or other non-musical elements, congregants reading scripture, staff leading various elements in the service)

## **Limitations, Omissions, and Future Research**

To date, we are unaware of any sort of research survey like the one we have conducted in our state for Alabama SBC churches. In processing and analyzing the data, it is certainly clear that future, deeper research would be beneficial. This was anticipated as we removed important questions in the early stages of building the research study. Now upon completion, we have identified areas/questions that would be helpful to explore in future research:

- The presence and frequency of Sunday evening services?
- The presence and frequency of Wednesday evening services?
- Musical leadership issues:
  - Is there shared leadership within songs (one person leads a verse, another leads the chorus, etc.)
  - Who sings melody? Which voice part?
  - What resources are used to help teams prepare? (Planning Center, recordings, chord charts, lead sheets, full sheet music, etc.)
  - What are transitions like between songs, for example, when/if songs occur back-to-back?
  - When do various groups/ensembles rehearse and for how long?
- Is the congregation verbally instructed/encouraged to worship expressively or participate in other ways?
- The type/level of training of the worship leader(s).
- Where does the pastor sit during worship when not preaching/speaking?
- Where does the worship team sit during worship when not leading?
- Choir ministry profile:
  - Do people have to audition?
  - Are there paid singers in the choir?
  - What does the choir look like when they lead (attire, robes, holding folders, etc.)?
  - Use of “presentational” music in addition to congregational music?
  - The numerical balance of men/women in the choir?
  - The ages represented in the choir?
- Production ministry profile:
  - What production team positions are used and how many are paid or volunteer?
  - What/how monitors are used to help the worship team hear?
  - If livestreaming, which services are livestreamed (if there are multiple services)?
  - Which streaming platform is used?
  - Are services broadcast on television?
  - Use of separate audio feed for broadcast?
  - How many cameras are used for livestream/broadcast?

- Estimated viewership of church's livestream compared to live attendance?
- The nature and look of house lighting and any changes during the service?
- Means of communication about worship and church life (QR code, website, social media, print, email/text, etc.)?
- What makes a service "contemporary" in worship style (or "traditional" or "blended")? What are the markers that when present (or absent alter the stylistic DNA of a worship service)?

In some instances, we mistakenly omitted certain possibilities in survey questions choices. This included:

- When considering musical styles, we neglected to include Southern (white) Gospel music as an option.
- When considering various Bible translations, we neglected to include the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) as an option.
- In considering worship elements, we neglected to include the Lord's Prayer as an option.