



What Might Other Churches Learn from the Southern Baptist Membership Loss?

by Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

Recently, the Associated Press reported that Southern Baptist churches suffered a loss of members in 2007. This may seem hard to believe for many that have watched Southern Baptists from a distance over the years. There is an expression heard in the South about places where “there are more Baptists than people.” This expression reflects the historic focus of Southern Baptists on evangelism and conversions, but also their tendency to inflate church rolls. Pastoral success is often viewed in terms of “additions” and membership growth. The practices of keeping a “non-resident” category of members and often leaving inactive members on the rolls have led some of the senior leaders of the denomination to caution against taking membership figures at face value. So, what are some of the reasons a system designed to avoid reporting losses can begin to decline numerically?

Membership tends to be a lagging indicator. Membership changes, in either a congregation or a denomination, are the result of many other factors that have been present for a while. For Southern Baptists, declining baptism rates over many decades may have signaled an impending downturn in membership. Because Southern Baptists practice believer-baptism, the number of baptisms is a gauge of how many new believers are being reached. Despite a doubling of membership since the 1950s, the number of baptisms each year has remained at a relatively consistent level. Decreases in the number of baptisms in recent years foreshadowed the downturn in membership. Baptisms fell for the third straight year in 2007 to the lowest level since 1987.

Ed Stetzer of the denomination’s North American Mission Board reports that in 2005, fifty-five percent of Southern Baptist churches baptized no youth. He also notes that in 2005 every baptism category, by age, went down except one – preschoolers under five years of age. Stetzer remarked about this unusual development, “Though I am not one to say that a five-year old cannot trust Christ, it’s hard to see the march toward infant baptism as good news.”

Defensiveness and denial. When membership declines, the natural tendency is to explain it away. In 1998, when the Southern Baptists showed their first membership decline in seventy years, some blamed the loss on a new computer system, while others said it was a temporary downturn as churches “clean” their rolls. (Methodists have used the “cleaning the rolls” mantra to explain slow growth or no growth for over a century.) Even allowing for the imprecise nature of church rolls, membership decline should be seen for what it is: a lagging indicator that some other important things need attention.

Conflict. Some level of tension is always present in healthy and growing churches. However severe conflict in congregations and denominations tends to take a toll on participation and membership. The president of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Reverend Frank Page, speaking with remarkable candor, placed part of the blame for membership loss on a perception that some of the denomination’s followers are “mean-spirited, hurtful and angry.” He contends that Baptists have been known too much in recent years for “what we’re against” rather than “what we’re for.”



Although the Southern Baptist Convention has always been conservative, in recent decades internal wars have led to a much more ideologically conservative, some would say fundamentalist, church. And this may be taking a toll on membership. The denomination's first membership loss came in 1998, after the Convention passed a resolution about "wives submitting graciously to their husbands." Some anticipated that evangelistic fruitfulness would be renewed in the wake of the more conservative emphasis, but this has not been the case. Becoming more conservative does not correlate with more new believers any more than just becoming more liberal does. There are many other variables.

Time takes its toll. As time goes by and churches become successful, it often becomes harder and harder to maintain success. With maturity comes a level of organizational complexity that can be a barrier to growth. And as churches and their members prosper, there is a temptation to become removed from the practices that led to success in the first place.

Research indicates that the older a congregation is, the less likely it is that it will show a membership gain. Churches of any age can grow. But statistics reveal that a lower percentage of the older churches have grown in the past year compared to newer ones. It could be that Southern Baptists had some of their greatest growth when they were not the largest Protestant denomination in the country, but rather when they were often seen on the sidelines of religious life that was dominated by more established traditions.

Change is hard but not impossible. Some demographic indicators suggest that Southern Baptists may be joining that cohort of mainline denominations that has been losing members since the 1960s, suggesting perhaps that well-established denominations, regardless of their theology, are increasingly unable to reach new Christians. Unfortunately, Southern Baptists will not learn much from the experience of the mainline churches in addressing their decline – except, perhaps, what not to do.

Southern Baptists, on the other hand, may have a chance to break the mold and actually change enough to turn their fortunes around. They are already recognizing the implications of the fact that their constituency has been primarily white and middle-class, and this part of the population is not growing. Southern Baptists are turning their attention to people of color (to remedy a historic weakness of theirs) by starting new churches (a historic strength of theirs). For a denomination that came into being with a defense of slavery, it is remarkable that today Southern Baptists have more than 2,000 African American churches. They are discovering, as other traditional denominations are, that their future is tied to reaching younger people and more diverse people.

If one had to name a single, all-purpose instrument of leadership, it would be communication.

John W. Gardner



Deliberate Outreach Strategy Leads to Growth by Rudy Guess

Worship attendance at Gardendale-Mt. Vernon United Methodist Church in Gardendale, Alabama, has increased more than 5 percent each year since 1999. One reason for the increase is three different worship experiences with one common message. We often begin the year with a series of messages designed with the unchurched in mind. For example, this year we began with a message series "Narnia and the Gospel" that was promoted in the newspaper and with door hangers.

New residents to the area are visited by our Welcome Wagon Team and given an information/gift packet. First-time worship guests are visited on the Sunday afternoon of their first visit and given a welcome packet. During the first 14 weeks after a person's initial visit in worship, a plan of follow up is implemented that includes regular contacts through telephone or visitation. Each month, a letter with an evaluation sheet is sent to all who visited during that month, asking them to rate how we welcomed them and asking for suggestions on what we could do better. At the same time, we are intentional about following up on our church family when they are absent. Everyone who misses worship three and five consecutive weeks is contacted by staff or their flock leader.

Throughout the year we offer outreach events. Examples include: a community Easter egg hunt with worship at the park, a community service day, Bring-A-Friend Sunday, supper with Santa, a Christmas pageant, and our annual August Camp Meeting Month. One of the key outreach ministries is our Child Enrichment Center. Many of our first-time worship guests first experience our church through the Child Enrichment Center.

We have also found a common spiritual growth emphasis, where morning worship and discipleship groups study a common theme, is very powerful. For example, our fall spiritual growth campaign in a recent year was Managing Life. It included the morning messages, daily devotional material, Sunday school material, and small group material.

Dr. Cooper R. (Rudy) Guess is senior pastor of Gardendale-Mt. Vernon UMC in Gardendale, Alabama. This article appears on the congregational development webpage of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church (www.northalabamaumc.org.) and is used with their permission.

The Right Question

*Leaders do not need answers.
Leaders must have the right questions.*

Churches and denominations invariably begin Christian organizations to carry out various ministries. Thomas H. Jeavons suggests these questions for any such groups:

- Whom does this organization wish to serve?
- How does this organization intend to serve these people?
- What does the organization need, and what must it be, to be able to render the service desired?
- How will the organization know if its mission is being fulfilled?