

'Conservative resurgence' failed to spark surge in evangelism, growth, statistics show_61404

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WASHINGTON (ABP)-Southern Baptist Convention leaders say the convention has experienced a “conservative resurgence” in the past 25 years. But statistics show it hasn’t experienced much of a surge.

June marks the 25th anniversary of the “resurgence,” a term SBC leaders favor to describe the turn to the right the denomination experienced beginning in 1979.

Although the convention—unlike most other major Protestant denominations in the United States—has continued to grow since then, an analysis of the group’s statistics shows its growth rate has slowed, and it hasn’t kept pace with the U.S. population.

And the same statistics show the SBC is significantly less evangelistic, per capita, than it was in 1979.

Depending on who's doing the analysis, Southern Baptists' slumping numbers show either the delayed effect of a pre-1979 moderate malaise or signs of the SBC's ultimate decline.

"Forty years of liberal domination left the denomination suffering from spiritual anemia. It takes awhile to get iron back in the system."

—Paige Patterson, architect of the SBC's sharp right turn and president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

"Forty years of liberal domination left the denomination suffering from spiritual anemia," said Paige Patterson, an architect of the conservative

movement and now president of Southern Baptists' largest seminary. "It takes awhile to get iron back in the system."

But moderate Baptist historian Bill Leonard sees it differently.

"What you have is statistical evidence of a much larger issue, which is that the whole denominational system for Southern Baptists is coming apart-the same way it is for the mainline" Protestant denominations, he said.

In 1980, Southern Baptist churches baptized 429,742 newly converted Christians. In 2003, that figure was 377,357. The annual number of SBC baptisms has hovered around the 400,000 mark since the 1950s.

However, the ratio of total members to baptisms-a statistic many Southern Baptists say is indicative of the denomination's fervor for evangelism-has continued to worsen. In 1954, Southern Baptists counted one baptism for every 22 church members. In 1979, the ratio was 1:36. In 2003, it had reached 1:43.

That means, according to a denominational news release about the 2003 statistics, "statistically, it took 43 existing church members to bring in one new member."

Additionally, the SBC's rate of growth in total membership is slower than it was in the pre-1979 years. In 1979, denominational figures showed that 13,379,073 people belonged to Southern Baptist churches. In 2003-the most recent year for which statistics are available-the total was 16,315,050. That's a 22 percent increase in 25 years.

But in the previous 25 years-the era in which theological moderates were at their zenith and conservatives felt the most marginalized-the rate of growth in total membership was 64 percent. The denomination went from 8.2 million members in 1954 to 13.4 million in 1979.

The shift in control of the Southern Baptist Convention began with the election of conservative Memphis pastor Adrian Rogers as SBC president in 1979.

Since then, a succession of conservative presidents has steered the convention to the right. Moderates and progressives are shut out of leadership roles and denominational employment. And the convention has taken increasingly conservative positions on theological, political and social issues.

Such drastic reforms, SBC leaders said, were necessary to prevent a slide into the kind of “liberal” theology espoused by the other mainline Protestant groups, many of which now lose more members annually than they gain. The same fate awaited the SBC, conservatives said, if it didn't shed the moderate influence.

So has the conservative rise to power been a success in numerical terms?

“Raw statistics have a story to tell, but they seldom tell the whole,” said Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. “Many of our churches are plateaued (in numerical growth) or declining. Yet, this is the age of the greatest churches ever and of the expansion of Southern Baptists into every corner of North America.”

Patterson also cited as signs of success large increases in the denomination's professional and volunteer missionary force since 1979, increasing enrollments at SBC seminaries and large growth in baptisms and new churches in nations served by SBC missionaries.

However, the lack of an SBC-wide increase in evangelistic fervor is his “greatest disappointment,” Patterson added. “Conservative theology does not necessarily translate into evangelism, church growth or devotion to Christ.”

Nonetheless, he said, "liberal and quasi-liberal theologies always translate into stagnation and decline. I would rather keep the theology biblical and pray for revival than have liberal theology and a dead denomination."

Many Baptist moderates, however, say the SBC controversy was a distraction that caused the same kind of numerical stagnation conservatives feared.

But two experts on SBC statistics suggested the denomination was bound to struggle, regardless of who was at the helm.

Leonard, a moderate leader and former Southern Baptist seminary professor, said, "The unity of Southern Baptist programs and Southern regional culture is what contributed to the growth and tenacity of the denomination (in the pre-1979 era). As Southern culture changed, the denomination didn't," said Leonard, now dean of the divinity school at Wake Forest University.

Clay Price, a former SBC Home Mission Board statistician who now works for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, agreed Southern Baptists' dramatic growth rates in the 1950s and '60s owed as much to culture as to denominational leadership.

"We benefited greatly from the shape of the [U.S.] population in the '50s, but that was a boon for everybody," he said. "The '60s—we were still growing pretty well. But trying to deal with the social issues at the time was a real struggle for Baptists, I think."

And by the 1970s and '80s, when the Sun Belt regions in which Southern Baptists are most numerous became some of the fastest-growing parts of the country, "we were, I think, caught napping," Price said.

Both Price and the SBC's current top statistician, Cliff Tharp, noted that the overwhelmingly white nature of most Southern Baptist congregations in an

increasingly ethnically diverse culture has contributed to the slowing rate of growth.

"There has been a dramatic increase in the Hispanic population and black population," said Tharp, who analyzes statistics for LifeWay Christian Resources, the SBC's publishing house.

"And while Southern Baptists have work in those areas, we have not been keeping pace in those areas at the way the population's been increasing. Southern Baptists are still heavily Anglo, and that is not the portion of the U.S. population that has been experiencing rapid growth."

Nonetheless, Tharp said, the SBC's numerical performance has more than held its own in comparison to the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church.

However, the SBC's membership also is aging. Tharp said he doesn't keep statistics on the average age of SBC church members, but he acknowledged there are far fewer children enrolled in SBC Sunday schools today than in the pre-“resurgence” era.

"In 1971, we had 1,434,892 children (ages 6-11) enrolled in Sunday school," Tharp said. "This last year, we had 1,022,905—that's a difference of about 400,000."

He also noted that enrollments of middle-aged and senior adults have increased correspondingly. Leonard said the age statistics also don't bode well for the SBC's future. The denomination's size and strength for much of the 20th century may have merely postponed a mainline-style decline, he warned.

"I think the genius of the old SBC system is that it has had a momentum that carried it longer than some of the mainlines, partly because it is so diverse, and there are pockets of significant evangelism that pumped up

church growth,” he noted.

Leonard said that for every fast-growing urban “megachurch” in the SBC, there are hundreds of small inner-city, small-town and rural congregations that are dying. He also noted the rolls in most Baptist congregations are notoriously inflated with members who haven’t been to church in years—and who may in fact have joined other denominations without notifying their previous congregation.

He also said SBC baptism statistics may not necessarily reflect effective evangelistic growth, because they are similarly bloated—such as with re-baptisms of longtime church members who were led by heavy-handed preachers to doubt their salvation.

In addition, since the vast majority of SBC churches also require adult baptism by immersion for membership, the numbers also reflect many already-converted Christians who transfer into Baptist churches from denominations that practice infant baptism.

“Because of the cultural and denominational disconnects, whoever was in charge of the SBC would have seen this kind of decline in some form or another,” Leonard said. “It was hubris for the conservatives to say they saved the denomination numerically. They may have saved it theologically, from their point of view, but they haven’t saved it numerically.”

But Patterson begged to differ. He drew a parallel between what he considered the lingering results of moderate control of the denomination and those of a 1980s nuclear-plant disaster in the former Soviet Union.

“Some of the effects of radiation sickness in the vicinity of Chernobyl were immediate. Others have manifested themselves only with the passing of the years,” he said.

“But, the ill effects, short-term or long-term, are not the responsibility of

these who did their best to save life and limit danger.”

Patterson added, “It is too early to tell all of the effects of the conservative renaissance. Wait 20 more years, and we will have a better view.”

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