

# When it comes to counting church members, the devil's in the details

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**By Amy Green**

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The [Southern Baptist Convention](#), with about 16.2 million members on the books, claims to be the nation's largest Protestant denomination. But Tom Ascol believes the active membership really is a fraction of that.

Ascol, pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Fla., points to a church report showing that only 6 million Southern Baptists attend church on an average Sunday.

"The reality is, the FBI couldn't find half of those (members) if they had to," he said.

Ascol plans to bring a resolution to the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting in San Antonio, calling for "integrity in the way we regard our membership rolls in our churches and also in the way we report statistics."

For religious organizations, membership figures are a lot like a position on the annual list of best colleges. A rise is trumpeted as a sign of vitality, strength and clout. And a drop probably means somebody somewhere checked the wrong box on some unimportant survey.

Vast differences in theology and accounting practices make it nearly impossible to know how many members a church body really has, whether active or occasional worshippers. That, in turn, makes side-by-side comparisons nearly impossible.

“Church membership is not as straightforward as it seems,” said Eileen Lindner, associate general secretary of the [National Council of Churches](#).

Lindner, a Presbyterian, produces the NCC’s annual *Yearbook of Canadian and American Churches*, widely seen as an authoritative source for church membership statistics. But even she knows there are limits.

Here’s a quick look at some of the challenges that go into collecting church membership statistics:

- **Self-reporting.**

Numbers are only as reliable as the church officials who collect them.

“For some, very careful counts are made of members,” the 2007 Yearbook says. “Other groups only make estimates.”

For example, the National Baptist Convention of America Inc., a historically black denomination, has reported a steady 3.5 million members since 2000—no additions, no deletions. The National Missionary Baptist Convention’s numbers have been frozen at 2.5 million since 1992.

Dale Jones, chairman of the [2000 Religious Congregations and Membership Study](#), which draws from 149 religious groups, said statisticians are wary of membership numbers ending in several zeros, though he declined to cite

examples.

- **Theology.**

Often a church's understanding of membership—how it is started, how it is maintained and how it can be revoked—influences counts.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), with 13 million members worldwide, often is reported to be one of the fastest-growing churches in the United States. Mormons start enrolling children as members through baptism at age 8.

Members stay on the rolls—even if they move to another church—unless they ask to be removed or are excommunicated.

“Baptism is a sacred covenant. We believe it has eternal consequences,” spokeswoman Kim Farah said. “Baptism is a very sacred thing, and it's a very personal thing, and far be it for us to take someone off the church membership except if they have asked.”

Ascol takes issue with some churches that enroll people after they answer an altar call and commit themselves to following Jesus. He says it's a superficial means of joining the church and requires no real commitment. Even after those members disappear, the denomination counts them, he said.

- **Active membership.**

Roman Catholics, the largest U.S. church with a reported 69 million members, start counting baptized infants as members and often don't remove people until they die. Most membership surveys don't actually count who's in the pews on Sunday.

To be disenrolled, Catholics must write a bishop to ask that their baptisms be revoked, said Mary Gautier, senior research associate for the [Center for](#)

[Applied Research in the Apostolate](#), a research center affiliated with Georgetown University.

That means it is possible, for example, to be born Catholic, married Methodist, die Lutheran and still be listed as a member of the 1 billion-member Roman Catholic Church.

“The Catholic understanding of membership is that a person becomes a member upon baptism and remains a member for life,” Gautier said. “Whether you show up at church or not is not what determines whether you’re a member.”

- **Institutional honesty.**

Mainline Protestant churches—Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and others—are roundly criticized for hemorrhaging members for 40 years. And while membership has surely dropped, mainline churches often are the first to cleanse their rolls of the inactive to produce a more accurate figure.

The 15-million-member Seventh-day Adventists, for example, saw their U.S. numbers drop in recent years in part because a church audit found duplicates on membership rolls, said Kathleen Jones, an assistant for general statistics for the denomination. Those duplicates are being purged.

Often, new pastors want up-to-date numbers because they don’t want to be blamed for any drops, said Lindner of the NCC. And some denominations assess fees to congregations based on membership, so the smaller the numbers, the smaller the fees.

- **Survey guilt.**

When asked about voting habits, belief in God or their feelings toward race or gender, Americans are notorious for answering what they think pollsters want to hear. Church demographers say the same rings true for church

attendance.

Some studies show more Americans consider themselves Southern Baptist than are accounted for by the denomination's own numbers, said Roger Finke, director of the [Association of Religion Data Archives](#) at Penn State.

The same is true of Catholics and Presbyterians, Finke said. And while an estimated 53 percent of Americans consider themselves Protestant, surveys of denominational membership find only 35 percent of the general population are members of a local congregation.

"Many people who are not members of a local church still view themselves as being Protestant, Catholic or some other religion, even though they're not actively involved in a church," Finke said.

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