

# Non-denominational, Baptist churches dominate list of fastest-growing

September 24, 2009

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) — About one-fourth of the largest and one-third of the fastest-growing churches in America are Baptist, according to an annual listing compiled by LifeWay Research for [Outreach Magazine](#).

Nearly half of the nation's largest and fastest-growing churches are non-denominational. With attendance averaging 43,500, the largest congregation, Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, has nearly twice as many members as the next-largest, LifeChurch.tv in Edmond, Okla., attended by 26,776.

"There is little question that more of the larger and fastest-growing churches are non-denominational," said LifeWay Research President Ed Stetzer, who compiled the lists. "And, in many of the cases, even those that were denominational, they often did not say so in their name."

Stetzer's group is part of LifeWay Christian Resources, the Southern Baptist Convention's publishing arm.

Forty-six of the nation's largest churches (which the study defined as having more than 5,600 members) and 47 of the fastest-growing (1,000-plus-member congregations posting an annual numerical gain of 300 or more, and a percentage increase of at least 5 percent) are non-denominational.

"It is tough to know why," Stetzer said. "We just know that it is happening."

Twenty-four of the largest churches, meanwhile, are Baptist, and 17 of those are Southern Baptist. By comparison, three Presbyterian, one United Methodist and one Evangelical Lutheran churches crack the list of the 100 largest churches. Even a growing denomination like the Assemblies of God claims only five of the largest churches.

LifePoint Church in Smyrna, Tenn., ranked America's 59th fastest-growing church, remains affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, even though it recently changed its name from First Baptist Church of Smyrna.

The largest Baptist congregation, Second Baptist Church in Houston, ranks No. 5 overall. Led by former Southern Baptist Convention president Ed Young, the church reported an average weekly attendance of 22,723.

Second Baptist comes in just behind North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Ga. Though non-denominational, North Point was started by former Southern Baptist minister Andy Stanley in 1995 and is now America's fourth-largest church with attendance of 23,377.

Thirty-one of the fastest-growing churches are Baptist. Out of those, 21 are Southern Baptist. The fastest-growing Baptist church is Long Hollow Baptist Church in Hendersonville, Tenn., reporting a growth rate of 40 percent.

Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., is one of six churches showing up as both one of the largest (No. 6) and fastest-growing (No. 23) churches. The congregation is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Stetzer said the high profile of Southern Baptists on both the largest and

fastest-growing lists doesn't change his earlier observations that the SBC, as a whole, is starting to decline.

LifeWay Research [projected](#) recently unless the aging and predominantly white denomination reverses a 50-year trend of declining evangelism, its membership will decline by nearly half — from 16.2 million to 8.7 million — by 2050.

"There are a good number of SBC megachurches on the list, but their growth does not offset the membership decline of the denomination as a whole," Stetzer explained. "There are growing SBC churches in every size — small, medium and large. However, the net membership has dropped for two years in a row."

That would apply even to some of the churches on the largest-churches list. For instance, Bellevue Baptist Church in Cordova, Tenn., was ranked the 80th-largest church, with attendance averaging 6,567. But eight years ago the church, under previous pastor Adrian Rogers, consistently averaged more than 7,500. On Sept. 13 the congregation, now led by Steve Gaines, [introduced](#) a new contemporary worship service aimed at turning around the decline.

To prepare the report, the magazine invited participation from more than 8,000 churches. The listings are based on February and March weekend attendance averages, excluding Easter.

While not a comprehensive and exhaustive list, the magazine said it went to great lengths to confirm data self-reported by pastors, staff or church officers.

*-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.*